

Second Edition

# Strategic Public Relations Management

Planning and Managing  
Effective Communication Programs



Erica Weintraub Austin • Bruce E. Pinkleton

**Strategic Public Relations Management**  
Planning and Managing Effective  
Communication Programs

Second Edition

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## **Planning and Managing Effective Communication Programs**

Second Edition

**Erica Weintraub Austin**  
**Bruce E. Pinkleton**



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*To our families*  
*Bruce, Jimmy, and Noah*  
*Chris, Lauren, and Brett*

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## Preface to the Second Edition

We decided to write this book in 1995 when we attended the national Public Relations Society of America convention in Seattle. We observed with some surprise that the sessions on measurement and evaluation attracted standing-room-only crowds, and many conversations in the hallways focused on the same issues. Managers seemed frustrated with the challenges of proving the value of public relations and developing credibility as counselors to upper management. Meanwhile, discussions about the need to prove results in the trade press had increased steadily. We were getting calls from organizations wanting research who never before had seen the need for it. We had alumni reporting back to us about how well their course work in research and planning had prepared them for the so-called real world and how their training had positioned them advantageously in their organizations. Both experience and observation had taught us that research and strategic planning serve as powerful tools.

Just as strategic plans need updating every few years, we realized we needed to update our book. As authors and teachers, we wrote this volume to serve as our ideal resource for our own classes and then hoped others would find it useful, too. We have felt honored and gratified that other teachers and practitioners also have put it to use successfully since publication of the first edition in 2001. Nonetheless, the field evolves and contexts change. Our files of new trends, examples, and research practices has grown, especially with the explosion of Internet technologies. Colleagues also have made a few suggestions that we wanted to incorporate, so we have done some updating and a bit of rearranging.

The primary changes cover three main areas. First, we have updated the information on research methods to incorporate methods that make use of the Internet and computer programs that aid data entry and analysis. Second, because we believe in learning by seeing and doing, we have

updated examples and added examples in spots that seemed a little bare or abstract and have clarified some of our existing examples. Finally, we have made some subtle changes to reflect the fact that this book applies to communication program planning more broadly than just to public relations specifically.

We would like to thank those of you who have given this book a try and provided us with feedback. We encourage others to contact us as well so that we can continue to make the book as useful as possible. We also would like to express our appreciation to Yi-Chun “Yvonne” Chen, Myiah Hively, and Rebecca Van de Vord for their assistance with this revision.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS REPRISE

We again want to extend our grateful thanks to the individuals and organizations who assisted us with the first edition. We have tried to put together lessons learned from both applied and academic experience. We have been privileged to learn from many excellent teachers including Chuck Atkin, Steve Chaffee, Rick Cole, June Flora, Gina Garramone, Jim Gaudino, Randall Murray, and Don Roberts. We are indebted to Jim Grunig, whose input, advice, and encouragement were critical factors in the completion of this book. We also owe many thanks to our students, who have taught us well.

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We also have greatly benefitted from the help of practitioners, including Maggie Crabtree, Ned Hubbell, Sara Labberton, Walter Lindenmann, Edward Maibach, Louis Richmond, Scott Simms, and Collin Tong. We also would like to thank the Puget Sound Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America, which invited us to try our ideas on them and then provided us with critical and enthusiastic feedback. Thanks also to the Institute for Public Relations Research and Education for financial support and to Christopher Knaus, who made that support possible. We have also appreciated the helpfulness of editor Linda Bathgate and production

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*Erica Weintraub Austin*  
*Bruce E. Pinkleton*

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# The Need for Strategic Public Relations Management

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## Chapter Contents

- Surviving Amid Fierce Competition
  - Strategic Versus Tactical Decision Making
  - The Often Misunderstood Role of Public Relations
  - Using Research to Enhance the Credibility of Public Relations
  - Organization of the Book
- 

Strategic public relations planning and research techniques have evolved into the most powerful tools available to public relations practitioners. Today's competitive business environment increasingly puts pressure on communication managers to demonstrate in a measurable way how the results from public relations programs benefit the organizations they serve. Practitioners well prepared to use the tools available to them can enjoy bigger budgets, more autonomy in decision making, and greater support from management. Managers relying on an intuitive model of public relations practice based on their knowledge of media markets and a well-developed network of contacts, however, tend to have less credibility, enjoy less autonomy, receive lower priority, and suffer greater risk of cost cutting that threatens job security.

## SURVIVING AMID FIERCE COMPETITION

The increasingly competitive business and social environment makes it critical for public relations managers to understand how to apply public relations planning, research, and program-evaluation practices that help ensure success and accountability. Research-based public relations practices enable managers to solve complex problems, set and achieve or exceed goals and objectives, track the opinions and beliefs of key publics, and employ program strategies with confidence that they will have the intended results. Although the use of research in public relations management cannot guarantee program success, it allows practitioners to maximize their abilities and move beyond creative reactions to scientific management. A more strategic management style can help control the ways a situation will develop and the outcomes practitioners achieve in those situations.

Consider the following scenarios in which communication professionals can use research-based planning to develop effective strategies for solving a problem and demonstrate program success.

### *Community Relations*

You are the public affairs director for the largest employer in a community. The local media have been running stories about problems at the company, claiming management has lost sight of its unique role in the community. The board of directors wants a clear understanding of public perceptions of the company. It also wants to develop new programs that will better serve the community and improve community relations. You are not convinced the company needs to establish new programs as much as it needs to support its existing programs. How do you determine the opinions and attitudes of community members toward the company? How do you measure community perceptions of existing programs, as well as community interest in new programs?

### *Special Events Planning and Promotion*

You are the manager of a performing arts coliseum. The coliseum has lost money on several events over the past 2 years and now is threatened by competition from a new community theater scheduled for construction in 2 years. Coliseum management and its board of directors sense they are out of touch with the community and are unsure how to address the situation. How can management determine community programming interests and begin to reorient itself to the needs and desires of community members without wasting valuable resources?

### *Political Campaign*

You are the campaign manager for a state senatorial candidate. The mostly rural district has 75,000 registered voters, many of whom work as farmers or in farming-related businesses and industries. The election is 9 months away, and the candidates are engaged in a close contest. How do you track changes in voters' perceptions of your candidate as the election nears?

### *Nonprofit*

You are a public relations practitioner at a small, nonprofit organization. Your new assignment is to rescue a local special event with a troubled history. The event, sponsored by the local chamber of commerce, is supposed to raise money for your organization while attracting visitors who patronize local businesses in your community. The most recent event was a disaster, however, despite a strong media relations effort. Because of low attendance, the organization barely broke even on the event, and local businesses have lost interest in participating next year as sponsors. How do you find out what went wrong and make next year's event a success?

### *Development*

You are a senior development officer at a major university. Development has become increasingly important as state budgets have dwindled. The university is making preparations for the largest development campaign in its history. Unfortunately, students let their partying get out of hand after a big football win over cross-state rivals, and the fracas attracted national media attention. You are concerned the negative media attention will significantly hinder university development efforts. You need to understand the opinions and attitudes of key segments of the public to develop a quick plan that will allow you to respond in an effective manner. How do you determine the responses of donors and nondonors to news of the disturbance?

Public relations practitioners face problems like these on a regular basis, and the small problems can help organizations deal with bigger ones when they arise. J. Wayne Leonard, the chief executive of Entergy, the power company serving the New Orleans area, said his company felt prepared for the unprecedented catastrophe of 2005's Hurricane Katrina because "we have the skills and planning to deal with catastrophe because we deal with it on a small scale all the time." Besides the company's efforts to restore power to 1.1 million customers, his management response included evacuation for his own employees, assurances that their jobs would be preserved, coordination with government officials, and making sure

“front-line” employees were “empowered to make common-sense decisions” (Feder, 2005).

### STRATEGIC VERSUS TACTICAL DECISION MAKING

According to Dick Martin (2005), the retired executive vice president of public relations for AT&T, successful public relations management requires acting as “an honest broker” who understands the concerns of internal and external stakeholders “and can synthesize them into a perspective the CEO can actually use.” Martin goes on to say, “it means making forecasts instead of compiling yesterday’s clips, and backing up those predictions with plans for dealing with them” (p. 23). In other words, successful public relations management requires strategic research and strategic planning.

Research helps practitioners acquire accurate information quickly at a relatively low cost to aid them in sophisticated planning and problem solving every day. When practitioners respond to organizational problems and challenges by engaging in media relations campaigns, they typically respond tactically instead of strategically. Strategic decision making is goal directed and guided by an organization’s larger purpose. According to Fred Nickols (2000), “strategy is the bridge between policy or high-order goals on the one hand and tactics or concrete actions on the other.” Tactical decision making, on the other hand, focuses more on day-to-day actions and therefore tends to be more response oriented in nature. Tactical decision making can allow public relations programs and campaigns to drift aimlessly, lacking direction or purpose. Practitioners may use media clips as the basis for program accountability in this instance, but the benefits of clip-based evaluation are limited. It is impossible, for example, for practitioners to determine message effect on targeted audiences’ opinions, attitudes, or behavior using clips. Practitioners find their ability to solve organizations’ problems through such a response also severely limited because no basis exists for determining the extent of a problem or evaluating the results of their programs.

Finally, organizational managers can become frustrated in their attempts to adapt to changing internal and external environments because practitioners have no basis for understanding and accomplishing the steps necessary to successfully address or accommodate stakeholders’ opinions. The result is that practitioners’ success may be limited. They typically end up in a defensive position with external and internal audiences, having little basis for effectively communicating the benefits of their campaigns and programs to organizational management.

When practitioners respond to problems and challenges strategically instead of tactically, they have a much greater likelihood of helping organizations meet their challenges, solve or avoid protracted problems, and adjust to the expectations of key stakeholders in mutually beneficial ways. Research and planning are not simple remedies for every organizational

problem. No amount of research or planning, for example, can rescue an organization from the consequences of its own poor performance. Nevertheless, practitioners' use of research, planning, and evaluation contribute to an informed organizational decision-making process with a greater likelihood of success. When practitioners use these tools, their programs and campaigns can have clear goals that direct program implementation. Practitioners can use formative research to set initial benchmarks for goals and objectives and to determine campaign strategy. Practitioners using tactics purposefully and selectively can communicate the benefits of public relations campaigns and programs to organizational management more easily. Ultimately, practitioners have the opportunity to enjoy greater success at placing their organizations in stable, mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholders.

As Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) noted, *public relations* is a management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends. This definition and many others like it, although simple on their face, actually suggest a complex set of processes. For public relations practitioners to operate as managers, for example, they cannot simply input the decisions made by others in an organization. They need to assert themselves as members of what is commonly called the *dominant coalition*, those with the authority to make decisions and set policy. In other words, they need to lead organizations and not just act as so-called service providers. Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) stated, "Just as communication flows one way, so too does influence" (p. 77). What Dozier et al. meant by this is that service providers implement decisions made by others instead of influencing organizational decision making. As a result, practitioners operating as service providers commonly are limited to advocating organizational viewpoints. This prevents them from helping the organization build and maintain long-term relationships that ensure long-term organizational success, which requires some adjustment to public perceptions and needs.

Agencies think they do better at building long-term relationships than their clients do. According to a 2004 survey of about 600 public relations executives and about 87 corporate public relations executives by the Counselors Academy and sponsored by *PR News*, agencies often believe they act strategically, but clients think agencies' actions display more of a tactical orientation ("PR Measurement," 2004). According to 73% of the clients surveyed, at least half of the services agencies provide should be strategic in nature. Less than 33% however, believe that PR agencies deliver that type of focus. Meanwhile, a full 87% of agencies agree that their emphasis should tilt toward strategy, and 62% think they deliver on this priority. Both clients and agencies agreed that "more meaningful" measurement would improve their relationships, although they differed on other actions that should take priority.

## THE OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations practices encompass a broad range of activities that can lead to confusion about how public relations differs from marketing and advertising. The goals of each differ in important ways. Advertising focuses on selling products to consumers through controlled placement of paid media messages, a narrow and specific role. Marketing, including integrated marketing communications, often uses public relations techniques to sell products and services. The marketing role is broader than that of advertising but still focuses on consumers rather than on all the key publics of an organization. Public relations, on the other hand, strives to help organizations develop and preserve the variety of relationships that ensure long-term success, broader goals than those of advertising or marketing. These stakeholders can include not only consumers but also government regulators, community members, shareholders, members of the media, employees, and others. Therefore, although public relations techniques often are employed in marketing and advertising, it is more appropriate for organizational management to treat public relations as the umbrella under which other activities, including marketing and advertising, occur.

Many practitioners struggle with the fact that this is difficult to put into practice, and they often find their role misunderstood. A survey of members of the New York chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), for example, found that 92% believed that most people do not understand what public relations is ("PR Pros," 1998). Public relations also suffers from low credibility. In the New York survey, 93% of the professionals enjoyed their work, and 68% were proud of their field, but 67% believed the field did not have a good image, and 65% believed they were not as respected as members of other professions. This image problem was supported by another credibility study undertaken by PRSA, which found the public relations specialist ranked almost at the bottom of a list of approximately 50 professions (Public Relations Society of America, 1999).

To improve their stature within organizations and among a broad range of publics, public relations professionals must take a planned, strategic approach to their programs and problem solving. When operating as subordinates instead of organizational leaders, practitioners implement decisions made by others instead of contributing to organizational decision making. In short, they work at a tactical level. In 2004, only 25% of agencies believed that they were "very involved" in helping clients research, discuss, and decide the business goals relevant to their communication programs ("While Agencies," 2004). As leading experts continue to emphasize, communication specialists who operate as technicians cannot effectively build public consensus or position an organization on issues of strategic importance

(e.g., Broom & Dozier, 1990; Dozier et al., 1995; "Keys," 1998; "M&As," 1998; "Personal competency," 1998; "Reputation," 1994).

### USING RESEARCH TO ENHANCE THE CREDIBILITY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

One reason communication specialists experience frustration and insufficient credibility appears to lie in how they conduct and apply research. According to Bruce Jeffries-Fox (Fox 2004), much public relations research serves only as window dressing. The situation seems to have changed little since a national survey of 300 professionals in 1996 found that managers see themselves in a double bind (Pinkleton, Austin, & Dixon, 1999). Professionals reported clients and CEOs as enthusiastic about research but reluctant about providing the budget to pay for it. Meanwhile, the more the managers performed a specific type of research, the less they valued it, and the more they valued a particular research method, the less they employed it. As shown in Table 1.1, practitioners relied most on measures of volume of media pickups and tracking of media coverage, which they found the least beneficial.

On the other hand, practitioners relied least on measures of changes in awareness, knowledge, attitudes, sales, and behavior, which they found the most valuable. The results also showed that the professionals almost uniformly embraced research as vital for proving that public relations programs are effective, but less than half agreed that research is accepted as an important part of public relations. A 1995 PRSA survey also found that 92% believed research was talked about more than used (Public Relations Society of America, 1995). Finally, although 68% of practitioners

**TABLE 1.1**  
Use and Value of Research Measures Among  
Public Relations Practitioners

<i>Research Measure</i>	<i>Mean for Use (Rank)</i>	<i>Mean for Perceived Value (Rank)</i>
Advertising equivalency	3.71 (9)	3.37 (9)
Volume of media pickups	5.43 (2)	4.57 (8)
Favorable media treatment	5.35 (3)	4.96 (7)
Media coverage	5.47 (1)	5.19 (5)
Changes in awareness	4.95 (4)	5.64 (4)
Changes in knowledge	4.85 (5)	5.90 (2)
Changes in attitudes	4.74 (6)	5.77 (3)
Changes in sales	4.07 (8)	5.08 (6)
Changes in behavior	4.64 (7)	6.02 (1)

Note. All measures on 7-point scales, with 1 indicating less use or value and 7 indicating more use or value.

attending a seminar on PR measurement said they do evaluations, only 23% said their research was providing useful results ("The New," 1999). This pattern of results suggests that constraints prevent communication professionals from doing enough research, or at least enough of the type of research that clients and senior executives find compelling. It comes as little surprise, then, that more than third of respondents to a survey in 2004 indicated that credibility of the profession would be a major issue affecting them in 2005 ("2005 Challenge," 2005).

In 2005, measurement still ranked as a top concern. According to two surveys (Cone & Feldman, 2004; "PR and Sales," 2005), a majority of practitioners indicated that they measure results but that the majority of budgeting for measurement methods still concentrated on publicity placement. Another survey found that practitioners considered measurement and accountability the biggest issues facing them in 2005 ("2005 Challenge," 2005).

According to Carole Cone, reporting on a *PR News/Counselors Academy* survey of 364 public relations executives (Cone & Feldman, 2004), budgeting challenges greatly damage accountability efforts. Cone asserted that stand-alone funding for public relations research rarely rose above \$2,000, although some larger companies were beginning to set a higher standard. But if most proposed research focuses on tactical-level publicity instead of on the demonstration of effects, why should clients devote more money to the enterprise? Todd Defren of Shift Communications ("PR and Sales," 2005) noted that public relations executives often have emphasized "wrong-headed thinking about how to measure PR success, such as buzz phrases like 'Share of Voice' or 'Ad Value Equivalency.' Everyone's trying to measure PR the way other people measure other marketing programs, and it's not working" (p. 3). Measuring the wrong things can make it look as if communication programs accomplish less than they really do.

Despite the challenges, the field seems to have made some progress on measurement issues. Some have called the new millenium the *Neolithic Age* for public relations measurement, a time of tremendous change ("Measurement," 2003). Experts assert that measurement has become more mainstream and that agencies that effectively incorporate measurement into their proposals obtain bigger budgets overall. According to Barr and colleagues ("PR Measurement," 2004), more practitioners are focusing on the demonstration of appropriate communication outcomes. This demonstration requires finding something simple that connects communication efforts to better business performance. The authors emphasized that this requires some creativity to go beyond standard return on investment (ROI) measures. "ROI is one of the most over-used terms in the business," noted Barr, a founder of a PR measurement firm (p. 6).

In other words, moving from a tactical approach to a strategic management style requires skillful use of research and planning techniques.

Discussions among senior public relations practitioners at professional meetings and in the trade press consistently emphasize the need for managers to demonstrate forward thinking by anticipating instead of reacting to problems and opportunities. In an increasingly crowded and complex media and social environment, practitioners need to design innovative programs they can prove will work. Gaining autonomy and the support and confidence of clients and upper management for their ideas requires several things. These include the ability to provide evidence supporting the need for communication programs, reasons why proposed strategies will work, and evidence at the end of a program that the program has indeed worked. In short, strategic public relations management demands a set of abilities that require competence in planning principles, research methods, communication theories, and effective communication presentation skills. According to Jeffrey Ory of Deveney Communications (Miller, 2005), public relations professionals often do a poor job of explaining how effective public relations can be measured and, therefore, how public relations can be used effectively.

Some communication experts such as Jeffries-Fox (2004) state that fear is one of the biggest constraints preventing managers from doing a better job of using research to guide strategic planning and demonstrate results. The purpose of this book is to allay those fears and replace them with skills and confidence. You do not have to be a statistical wizard to conduct and interpret meaningful research. In addition, when you do research strategically, you do not need to fear what the results will show. Even poor results for one program can point the way to more effective future planning when research is sensitive enough to demonstrate not just *whether* a program has an effect but also *how*. "It's not a question of pass or fail," according to *PR News* ("Measurement," 2003).

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The organization of this book is designed to provide communication managers with the range of tools required for the development, communication, and evaluation of effective programs. The toolkit includes basics of the strategic planning process, a general overview plus a range of specific guidelines for managers to use when hiring or performing their own research, theoretical perspectives that can help managers interpret research and develop effective strategies and tactics, and guidelines for the presentation of research findings and program plans.

Part I of this book presents a framework for planning that managers can apply to guide decision making. Chapter 2 addresses mission statement development, problem statement creation, and situation analysis, all of which form the basis for program development. Chapter 3 introduces the

elements of the strategic planning process, which include goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics. Chapter 4 focuses on how to determine research needs and develop a research plan to gather information that will help practitioners plan their program.

Part II addresses when and how to do research for public relations planning and evaluation. Chapter 5 covers basic issues to consider when developing research plans. Chapter 6 provides the basics of sampling using terms and concepts accessible to those uninitiated in social science methods. Chapter 7 introduces the range of informal methods available to the communication manager, whereas chapter 8 provides some detail about how to conduct focus groups. Chapter 9 introduces the range of formal methods commonly used in communication research, and chapter 10 covers the nuances of survey research specifically. Chapter 11 focuses on how to construct questionnaires that provide trustworthy and useful information, and chapter 12 discusses how to collect and analyze questionnaire data.

Part III explains how communication theory can assist the manager in strategic planning. Chapter 13 introduces public relations and communication theory and demonstrates its relevance to daily practice. Chapter 14 covers the range of theories available to help managers develop effective program strategies, and chapter 15 boils down decades of research into a set of principles and applications for practical use.

Part IV discusses how to present a persuasive case for public relations programming, with chapter 16 explaining the elements of a public relations proposal and providing a set of writing and presentation tips.

Experts in public relations seem to agree that public relations practitioners have the most success when they operate from a research-based, strategic management style. This book is designed not only to help novices through the strategic planning process but also to provide the depth required for an experienced professional looking for a concise reference. It is intended for use at either the undergraduate or graduate level and has been written to be accessible to those on a self-guided tour. The goal of this book is to provide professionals and advanced public relations practitioners with the information they need to engage in strategic public relations management. Communication specialists who apply the skills explained in this book should secure a place for public relations and communication management at the leadership level in organizational decision making.

# I

## FRAMEWORK FOR PLANNING

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# 2

## Where the Strategic Manager Begins: Taking Stock

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### Chapter Contents

- Management by Objectives
  - The Accountable Manager
  - The Mission Statement
  - Mission Versus Vision and Values
  - The Problem Statement
  - The Situation Analysis
  - Sources of Information
  - Final Thoughts
- 

For communication practitioners trained more as writers than as social scientists, the new bottom-line-oriented environment presents a major challenge. Organizations want cost-effective results. Many public relations practitioners argue that the cultivation of relationships is a fuzzy business, difficult to document with numbers. The result: Public relations positions become vulnerable to corporate “restructuring.”

The best insurance against cost cutters and the best way to gain credibility and mobility in management is to adopt what Broom and Dozier (1990) called the *scientific management* approach. This approach does not discount the importance of creativity and communication skills, but it does put them into an *effects-oriented* context. Say a hospital plans to open a new wing in the hope that it will increase business. For a hospital, this is a touchy subject: It does not want to appear greedy to take advantage of people’s bad news and emergencies. Moreover, the promotion budget probably is

limited because many hospitals are struggling to keep up with increasing medical costs and decreasing insurance reimbursements. Hospitals also do not want to appear wasteful, particularly if financed publicly. How can the hospital increase business without causing offense and without spending too much or appearing unseemly?

In what Nager and Allen (1984) called *traditional public relations*, the communication manager would come up with creative ideas for communication vehicles such as brochures and advertisements according to the budget and staffing available and would begin with questions. Should we use two-color or four-color? Glossy or matte? The manager's decision making would focus on what looks best, sounds best, and works within the budget.

The scientific manager, in contrast, would begin with a different set of questions. Why do we need this new wing? To whom are we targeting this campaign? How much increased traffic do we need, and how much is realistic to expect? What will motivate people to take advantage of this new service? *Bottom line*: What goals should we set for this campaign?

The effects emphasis is *goal oriented*, lending itself to the bottom-line perspective of most organizations. Once you know what you must accomplish, you can focus your efforts more efficiently and to greater effect. The two major components of the scientific management approach are planning and research.

## MANAGEMENT BY OBJECTIVES

The most common planning tool used by communication managers is known as *management by objectives* (MBO). MBO is an effects-oriented process for developing what are essentially campaign recipes. If you write an easy-to-follow recipe and you have skilled personnel in your kitchen, then you can have confidence that you will cook up a successful campaign. Just like writing a recipe, however, MBO requires that you make strategic decisions about what you want to serve (a meal or just a dessert), how many you want to serve (your definition of bottom-line success), whom you expect for dinner (your publics), and when they will arrive (your deadline). You can adjust the ingredients according to your budget. Not every recipe for chocolate cake needs Belgian chocolate, and not every campaign will need glossy, four-color brochures. But just as you would not leave flour out of a bread recipe, the MBO approach can help you identify which campaign ingredients cannot be compromised. Moreover, the MBO approach can provide the hard evidence and persuasive reasoning you will need to convince your key decision makers that the campaign ingredients you identify as essential really are essential. In short, the MBO approach gives the communication manager credibility, flexibility, and control.

The MBO approach sounds easy but frequently confuses managers because practitioners often have an incomplete understanding of the elements that go into MBO recipe building. If you ever have wondered what the difference is between a goal and an objective, you have a lot of company. Definitions of goals and objectives rarely are provided, even in public relations textbooks. This chapter makes those distinctions clear.

## THE ACCOUNTABLE MANAGER

Let's begin by comparing the communication manager's role in traditional and scientific management approaches. As discussed by Nager and Allen (1984), the bottom line of communication programs differs fundamentally. Traditional practitioners do lots of communication activities, but they may have a piecemeal perspective. They may produce newsletters, brochures, news releases, and an occasional special event, for example, without giving much thought to how each news story or communication piece serves a specific and an overall purpose. MBO practitioners, in contrast, have lots of goals they plan to accomplish. Their perspective is more holistic. As a result, everything MBO managers do has a clear, effects-oriented purpose. Because they organize their activities according to a results perspective, they can show the need and the effectiveness of each effort more readily than traditional practitioners can. Each newsletter, brochure, news release, and special event serves a clear purpose that is part of a larger framework.

The MBO manager, or scientific manager, focuses on six activities, as summarized by Ehling (1985):

1. *Conceptualization*. A leader must hold the big picture and be able to identify and organize the smaller elements to fit that larger picture. The goal is to identify specific tasks and responsibilities that need to be fulfilled to maintain mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public on which its success depends, such as budgeting, goal setting, strategic planning, organizing, administering, and evaluating (notice that these elements constitute tasks 2 through 6).
2. *Monitoring*. Monitoring is, in other words, research. The scientific manager will do much issue tracking to stay ahead of emerging trends and on top of potential crises. The goal is to anticipate and evaluate opportunities and challenges that arise out of the organization's interactions and relationships with other organizations and societies.
3. *Planning*. The manager must be able to build the recipes that will guide the organization through the opportunities and challenges identified in the monitoring process. The goal is to ensure the

achievement of measurable results that fulfill needs identified in the monitoring process.

4. *Organization and coordination.* The manager must make effective use of available resources. These include budget and personnel within the organization as well as opportunities for cooperative partnerships with other organizations that can help to achieve mutually beneficial results. The goal is the effective and efficient implementation strategies for the communication programs developed in the planning process.
5. *Administration.* The manager must fulfill the promises made in the planning process. The manager will supervise the programs to activate and adjust communication programs. Nothing ever goes exactly according to plan because resources and the environment continue to change; thus, the manager must maintain motivating, creative leadership throughout the implementation of each program. The goal is the fulfillment of communication program goals on budget and on deadline.
6. *Evaluation.* The scientific manager remains accountable. Every communication activity must have a clear purpose and an anticipated result. The manager must show results and an ability to use program successes and failures as part of the monitoring process to develop even more effective future programs. The goal is the accountability, credibility, and guidance to make future communication programs even more successful.

The MBO recipe-building process, then, parallels the four-step public relations process familiar to many practitioners (Cutlip et al., 2006).

*Step 1 is defining the public relations problem.* The definitional process helps the manager identify the effects campaigns need to accomplish. This encompasses Roles 1 and 2.

*Step 2 is planning and programming.* At this point the manager develops the campaign recipe in detail. This encompasses Roles 3 and 4.

*Step 3 is taking action and communicating,* or implementing the program, which encompasses Role 5.

*Step 4 evaluating the program,* in which the manager identifies program successes and failures for accountability and future use. This encompasses Role 6.

With the manager's roles and the planning process identified, we turn to the products the manager will use and produce at each stage. These are



FIG. 2.1. The strategic planning pyramid. The organization's mission forms the basis for strategic planning. Decisions at each level of the pyramid depend on the decisions made on the underlying levels.

the key ingredients of the recipe the manager must develop. They include (a) a mission statement, (b) a problem statement, (c) situation analysis, (d) goals, (e) objectives, (f) strategies, and (g) tactics.

## THE MISSION STATEMENT

We can think of these elements as a pyramid (Fig. 2.1), for which the mission statement forms the base. Everything we do must show clear relevance to the organization's mission. A *mission statement* is the statement of philosophy and purpose for an organization. Every organization should have one, and thus your first step as a manager is to obtain a copy, or, if one does not exist, to develop one. Mission statements can take a lot of time and effort to develop and can stretch for pages. The communication manager needs some sort of summary, however, to guide the daily activities of everyone connected with the organization. Everyone associated with an organization should have a clear idea of why the organization exists—beyond “to make money”—something along the lines of an abstract or

point summary. The Robert Mondavi Winery, for example, developed a one-line vision statement to appear in every voicemail message from the CEO, in all statements to analysts, in most official statements, and at the beginning of most formal presentations to employees. The statement, "We will be the preeminent fine wine producer in the world," drives all strategic planning. Development of the deceptively simple statement required input from all employees to make sure that they would buy into it. The senior management drafted a statement and met with 6 to 10 groups of 15 to 20 employees to discuss and evaluate the statement. A second draft based on employee comments was tested the same way, resulting in the final version.

The mission statement should identify the products the organization produces, the services it provides, and the types of relationships it strives to cultivate. A regional charter airline such as Champion Air (1999) in the Minneapolis area focuses on "surpassing the expectations of our customers," reflecting its specialist status, whereas a discount passenger airline such as Southwest Airlines (2005) focuses on "low fares, lots of flights, and the friendliest service in the sky." Northwest Airlines (1999), with a global focus, aims to provide "safe, clean, on-time air transportation with luggage, in a professional and consistent manner," with attention to establishing new routes and implementing electronic services. Airborne Express (1999), meanwhile, delivers packages, not people, and so its mission is "to provide businesses customized distribution solutions at lower cost than the competition."

Organizations that appear somewhat similar may have missions that differ in important ways. Religion, for example, can infuse faith-based hospitals with a variety of emphases that best suit their clientele and communities. The mission of Jewish Memorial Hospital and Rehabilitation Center in Boston (2005) is "to deliver quality rehabilitation and extended acute medical care in a manner both respectful and reflective of the diverse communities that we serve." Meanwhile, Florida Hospital (2005), run by the Seventh Day Adventist Church, states that its "first responsibility as a Christian hospital is to extend the healing ministry of Christ to all patients who come to us. We endeavor to deliver high-quality service, showing concern for patients' emotional and spiritual needs, as well as their physical condition." Fort Defiance PHS (Public Health Service) Hospital in Arizona (2005) aims "to promote family values, strength, and harmony. We are dedicated to uphold and build the traditional Navajo Ke concept (Personal Identity and Self-esteem defined by family and clan structure). Our health services are comprehensive, accessible, and culturally and linguistically sensitive."

Differences in mission can present difficult challenges for communication managers when organizations merge for financial or other reasons. A particularly dramatic situation can arise in communities such as

Springfield and Eugene, Oregon, that have very different community norms but now share a Roman Catholic hospital. A diverse community might expect a hospital to provide whatever services the community members desire, but the teachings of the Catholic church preclude services that conflict with its values regarding family planning.

## MISSION VERSUS VISION AND VALUES

Whereas the *mission statement* sets out a strategic focus for accomplishing a long-term outcome, the *vision* conveys this long-term ideal. Organizations frequently develop a vision statement as a short abbreviation of the mission suitable for publication on websites, business cards, and stationery. The *vision statement* includes the following purposes:

- shares the organization's values and intended contribution to society
- fosters a sense of community and purpose within the organization in order to challenge members of the organization to work together toward a long-term aim
- articulates how the organization should look in the future, presenting the ideal, or an ambitious, long-term goal

Some organizations also articulate a set of values intended to help support their mission. Citrus Memorial Hospital (2005) in Inverness, Florida, for example, encourages employees to embrace seven organizational values—caring, communication, cost-effectiveness, pride, professionalism, progressiveness, and teamwork—“to maintain an efficient, effective and economical operation that provides and stimulates continuous quality improvement in health care.”

The Atlanta VA Medical Center (2005), meanwhile, has a more specific focus. To “provide timely and compassionate healthcare, which contributes to the well-being and quality of life of our veterans,” the hospital pledges its commitment to a different set of core values that include “putting veterans first” by exhorting its employees to act **respectful**, **trustworthy**, professional and **compassionate**; to emphasize **quality**; to provide **customer service** “dedicated to the unilateral well being of all veterans, without exception”; to value **diversity** of both people and ideas; and to achieve increased **productivity** with regard to the variety of services they can provide.

Medical City Hospital (2005) in Dallas, Texas, has distinguished among its mission, vision, and values as follows:

**Our Mission** Above all else, we are committed to the care and improvement of human life. In recognition of this commitment, we will strive to deliver high quality, cost-effective healthcare in our community.

**Our Vision** By 2007, Medical City must be the quality healthcare leader in our community . . .

Trusted by our patients and their families to create a caring, compassionate healing experience;

Respected by our fellow employees as important members of the team;

Valued by our physicians as colleagues in providing quality care for our patients;

Accountable to fulfill our commitments and invest in our organization;

Recognized as the premier healthcare resource . . . and inspiring other organizations to join in our passion for excellence and innovation.

**Our Values**

We recognize and affirm the unique and intrinsic worth of each individual.

We treat all those we serve with compassion and kindness.

We act with absolute honesty, integrity and fairness in the way we conduct our business and the way we live our lives.

We trust our colleagues as valuable members of our healthcare team and pledge to treat one another with loyalty, respect and dignity.

Displaying the mission or vision statement prominently on internal and external communication pieces ensures that everyone with whom the organization has a relationship will have a clear understanding of what the company has on its list of priorities. Unfortunately, many companies fail to do this. Because the mission statement provides the organization's justification for existence, communication managers can effectively justify their importance as a department and as individual staff members by showing how communication programs enhance the organization's mission. Using the mission statement, communication managers can show how the communication department's activities are central to the organization's success. Public relations is no longer marginalized, and the result is that public relations departments become much less vulnerable to the budget axe.

## THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Because public relations is the construction and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships, the mission statement provides the guidelines for all strategic planning and monitoring. In particular, it enables the manager to produce the *problem statement*. To do so, the manager must address two key questions: How do you know a problem when you see one? and What is a problem statement?

A *problem* occurs when the organization encounters something in its environment or in its relationships with key publics that threatens its ability to fulfill its mission. The hospital, for example, may have encountered new insurance rules regarding maternity hospitalization that cut in half the number of days patients may stay following a healthy birth that is free of

complications. The average stay in 1996 had shrunk from 2 weeks to 1 week to 3 days to 2 days to about 1 day, finally prompting legislation to require a 48-hour minimum stay in most states. In addition to the potential threat to maternal and infant health, the increasingly empty beds in the maternity ward could threaten the hospital's ability to maintain a healthy bottom line. This does not give the communication manager anything substantive to guide planning, however. "We need to make more money" provides no clues to identify which ways of making money are appropriate for the hospital, nor does it provide any reason why key publics inside and outside the organization should feel motivated to care whether the hospital makes its money. The manager needs to know the *philosophy and purpose* of the organization—its mission—to guide planning and to build mutually beneficial relationships.

So, what is the mission of a hospital and how would the reduction in insurance coverage for maternity care threaten this mission? Some hospitals take a broad focus, providing high-quality care for the community, and some hospitals serve communities that have higher birth rates or more uninsured individuals. Some hospitals also have a research-related mission or a teaching-related mission, as shown in Sidebar 2.1. Some have quite specialized missions that might make the changes in maternity policies irrelevant. These statements help the communication manager identify publics and activities that are appropriate.

If the mission statement represents the organization's foundational guiding document for all of its operations, the *problem statement* becomes the communication manager's foundational document to guide a communication campaign. The problem statement summarizes the key elements of the issue or opportunity and how it relates to the organization's ability to fulfill its mission. The problem statement is concise and specific, much like the lead of a news story. According to Kendall (1996), it should be 18 to 25 words, phrased in a simple subject-verb-object construction. Kendall noted that, in some cases, the problem statement may be more appropriately considered an opportunity statement. Armed with no information other than the problem statement, a manager should be able to at least rough out some ideas for a successful campaign.

The problem statement comprises six elements (Fig. 2.2):

1. What is the problem, issue, or opportunity? The problem may be one of reputation, of financial difficulty, of declining membership, of impending legislation, and so on.
2. Where is this problem occurring? This may represent an internal problem, a regional issue, a national issue, or even an international issue.
3. When did this become a problem? Perhaps this issue always has been a problem, or perhaps this problem is getting better or worse or is cyclical.

## SIDEBAR 2.1 Hospital Mission Statements

*A mission statement should identify the products the organization produces, the services it provides, and the types of relationships it strives to cultivate. Note that statements differ according to the type and size of community served, the affiliation of the hospital, and the emphasis of the hospital on training, community outreach, or a specialized type of medicine.*

### UNIVERSITY/TEACHING

#### **The University Hospital, Cincinnati (1999)**

To strive to provide care of the highest quality to all persons seeking treatment in our facilities. This includes a blend of human concern and clinical expertise, while promoting excellence in education, research, and technological progress.

#### **New York University Medical Center, New York University School of Medicine (from the original statement, 50 years ago) (1999)**

The training of physicians, the search for new knowledge, and the care of the sick. The three are inseparable. Medicine can be handed on to succeeding generations only by long training in the scientific methods of investigation and by the actual care of patients. . . . Our current interpretation of this statement is that the appropriate teaching of medicine and the training of physicians must be accomplished in a setting of excellence at the highest level of human achievement. With this understanding, we strive to provide a rich environment for scholarship, research, and patient care where the faculty understands that the students, as our successors, should not merely replace, but surpass.

#### **St. Francis Health System, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (2005)**

1) to establish and maintain a hospital for the care of persons suffering from illnesses or disabilities, without distinction as to their religious beliefs, race, national origin, age, sex, handicap or economic status; 2) to carry on educational activities related to rendering care to the sick and injured or the promotion of health; 3) to encourage research related to health care; 4) to participate, as far as circumstances may warrant, in any activity intended to promote individual and community health.

### URBAN COMMUNITY/TEACHING

#### **Detroit Medical Center (2005)**

Committed to improving the health of the population served by providing the highest quality health care services in a caring and efficient manner. Together, with Wayne State University, the DMC strives to be the region's premier health care resource through a broad range of clinical services; the discovery and application of new knowledge; and the education of practitioners, teachers and scientists.

## **SIDEBAR 2.1 (Continued)**

### **Detroit Receiving Hospital (2005)**

Committed to being one of the nation's premier emergency, trauma, critical care and ambulatory centers providing high quality services to all patients within the communities serviced, regardless of the person's religious, racial or ethnic identification or economic status. In collaboration with Wayne State University, Detroit Receiving strives to provide leadership in the education and training of health care professionals and in the development of new diagnostics and treatment modalities that enhance the quality of life.

### **Saint Joseph Hospital, Denver, Colorado, owned by the Sisters of the Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas (2005)**

To provide a continuum of healthcare services—ambulatory through tertiary—in partnership with the medical staff. The hospital, which is sponsored by the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth and operates under the direction of the Health Services Corporation, intends to provide these services in a healing environment which meets the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of its patients and their families, other visitors, donors, and employees. Superior service and fiscal and environmental responsibility are cornerstones of the excellent care Saint Joseph Hospital strives to provide to residents of the Rocky Mountain Region. The hospital is committed to providing graduate medical education, to caring for the medically indigent, to improving community health, and to continuing its leadership role in Colorado healthcare.

## **REGIONAL/SUBURBAN**

### **Medina General Hospital, Medina, Ohio (2005)**

The leader in providing ethical quality care for the individual and in promoting a healthy community.

### **Jefferson General Hospital, Port Townsend, Washington (2005)**

To provide quality, cost-effective medical care and health services to residents and visitors of Eastern Jefferson County and adjacent areas.

### **St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Belleville, Illinois, Hospital Sisters of the Third Order of Saint Francis (2005)**

To minister to those in need of healthcare in response to God's call to serve each other, especially the poor. In the performance of its mission, St. Elizabeth's Hospital will foster the values of love, compassion, competence, and reverence for life. St. Elizabeth's Hospital is committed to performing its mission through ecumenical cooperation with other healthcare providers and the community, whenever possible.

**(Continues)**

## **SIDEBAR 2.1 (Continued)**

### **RURAL COMMUNITY/REGIONAL**

#### **Clearwater Valley Hospital and Clinics, Inc., Orofino, Idaho (North Central Idaho) (1999)**

Providing competent, compassionate health and wellness services in an environment which enhances human worth. The mission is accomplished through the implementation of the values *respect, hospitality, justice, and stewardship*. The Hospital and Clinics are committed to witness God's love for all people, with a special concern for the poor and powerless.

#### **Mary Lanning Memorial Hospital, nonprofit regional health center in South Central Nebraska (2005)**

Committed to a tradition of excellence through leadership in the provision of quality medical services and health education for the people of South Central Nebraska.

### **SPECIALIST**

#### **Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital, Edmonton, Alberta (2005)**

To work with our patients and their families as they meet the challenges of disability and seek fulfillment in their lives; share knowledge and experience with those who are involved in the process of rehabilitation; engage in research to advance knowledge and contribute to rehabilitation practice in the community at large.

#### **Mary Free Bed Hospital & Rehabilitation Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan (2005)**

To provide people with disabilities the opportunity to achieve independence through rehabilitation. We seek excellence through innovation, leadership, and advocacy.

#### **Children's Hospital and Health Center, San Diego, California**

To restore, sustain, and enhance the health and developmental potential of children.

#### **Woman's Hospital, Baton Rouge, Louisiana (2005)**

To create opportunities that improve the health status of women and infants.

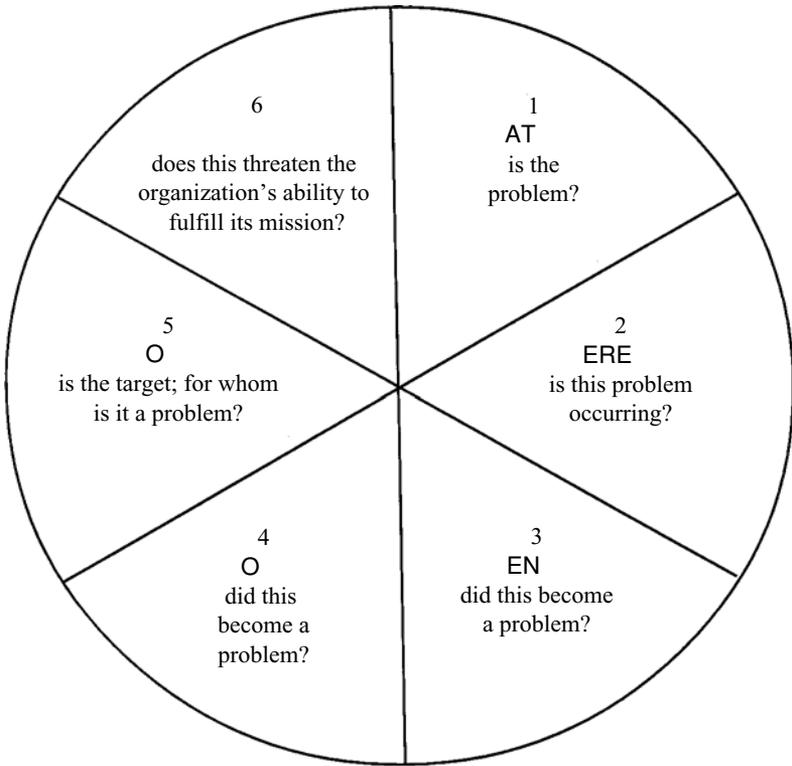


FIG. 2.2. Elements of the problem statement. A statement of the public relations problem is incomplete unless it includes all six of the elements portrayed.

4. How did this become a problem? Your problem may have developed because of a lack of awareness, poor product quality, or ineffective customer or member relations.
5. For whom is it a problem? Your problem most likely does not affect everyone in the world but instead involves certain key publics with whom your organization's relationship is threatened.
6. Why should the organization care about this problem? In other words, why does this threaten the organization's ability to fulfill its mission? Many organizations neglect to answer the "so what" question. If your problem has no easily identifiable "why," you probably will find it difficult to get key decision makers in your organization to buy into the need for your campaign.

Your problem statement, in short, provides the justification and the framework for your campaign, all in one or two sentences. Your goal,

as discussed in chapter 3, will be to negate the problem (or maximize the opportunity).

## THE SITUATION ANALYSIS

Frequently, the communication manager receives a request to develop a campaign based on an initial issue statement that contains few of the elements necessary for a complete problem definition. To develop a complete problem statement usually requires formative research to flesh out the details. These details are known as the *situation analysis*.

The *situation analysis* is a detailed explanation of the opportunities and challenges (sometimes called *opportunities and threats*) that exist within the organization and in its environment. Sometimes the analysis of opportunities and challenges is called *SWOT analysis*, for *strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats*. Referring to “threats” can seem defensive, whereas referring to challenges communicates more confidence. Both approaches emphasize the need for the manager to find out as much as possible about the problem, the relevant publics, and the environment.

A situation analysis usually begins with the problem statement, followed by a discussion of the history of the problem and how it conflicts with the organization’s mission. The situation analysis then includes a discussion of the relevant publics as well as a discussion of opportunities that should help solve the problem and challenges that could pose barriers. Assumptions must be made clear, and all assertions must be backed up with evidence: data, theory, management and communication principles, expert sources, and other relevant information. The situation analysis represents everything you have been able to find out about the problem. It shows your familiarity with the organization, its publics, the environment, and the problem. It also helps you identify what additional information you may need to design a successful campaign.

The situation analysis makes it possible for the communication team to develop hypotheses, or hunches, about possible causes and solutions for your problem. You may conclude from your analysis that a problem initially presented as poor communication is an informed lack of public support for a company’s vision. On the other hand, research might reveal that an apparent lack of support stems from the noisy complaints of a small minority, with the majority unaware of the issue but ready to mobilize on the organization’s behalf. These discoveries will affect the type of communication program an organization designs.

The situation analysis can spark creative problem solving by helping practitioners to organize seemingly disparate bits of information or to identify seemingly unrelated organizations that share similar concerns. The Arkansas Rice Depot, for example, a food bank based in Little Rock,

identified a serious problem among disadvantaged schoolchildren: A school nurse had raised the concern that even if children received free school breakfasts and lunches, they often suffered hunger over weekends and holidays. The food bank and the school had operated independently, but they realized they needed to join forces. To make sure their food got to the children, the food bank began sending food home in the children's school backpacks. America's Second Harvest adopted the idea and the program has spread to at least 12 of its affiliates nationwide. They hope to secure funding to enable more schools to participate.

## SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The development of a situation analysis requires a thorough understanding of the issue or problem, the client organization, the environment, and the relevant publics. Original research often is necessary, such as surveys and focus groups, but library research and an examination of organizational records also can provide important information. The communication manager's ability to solve a problem depends on available resources (e.g., time and funding), available expertise, political realities, and the reasons for the problem. The manager's challenge, therefore, is to gather as much background information as possible, as quickly as possible, to determine the scope of the problem as well as the challenges and opportunities that will affect problem solving. Forces for and against change exist both within an organization and outside in the political and social environment. Along with the internal and external factors, the practitioner may find Hubbell's Helpful Questions useful, developed from the lessons of Ned Hubbell, retired director of Project Outreach, Michigan Education Association, as a set of questions to ask before beginning to plan (Sidebar 2.2).

### Internal Factors

Often, an organization attributes its problems to outside forces (the media are a favorite target for blame), but the communication manager must begin to understand the problem by developing an understanding of the organization itself. Important types of information include the organization's mission, its decision-making and operating structure, its evolution and history, and its culture. Sources of information include the following:

- Written documents such as mission statements, charters, and bylaws
- Biographical statements of key members of the organization
- Descriptions of products and services
- Records regarding budgets, expenditures, and staffing levels
- Records regarding business policies and procedures

**SIDEBAR 2.2**  
**Hubbell's Helpful Questions (or 30-something questions  
you should ask before planning)**

- I. Organizational History
  - A. Why was the organization established?
  - B. When was the organization established?
  - C. Were there any problems to overcome in the development of the organization?
  - D. Have there been any major changes in organizational direction or policy?
  - E. What is the organization's status in the community?
- II. Organizational Structure
  - A. Is there an organizational chart available?
  - B. What is the total number of staff?
  - C. How are responsibilities divided?
  - D. What functions are handled in each department or section?
  - E. What importance does the organization attribute to each function and why?
- III. Organizational Philosophy/Mission/Goals
  - A. What is the purpose of the organization?
  - B. What is the stated mission of the organization?
  - C. Is there a dominant organizational philosophy?
  - D. Does the organization have any set goals?
- IV. Organizational Policies of Operation
  - A. Who constitutes the board of directors? How was the board selected?
  - B. Does the organization have any advisory panels or committees?
  - C. Who determines how the organization operates?
  - D. Who must be consulted before decisions are made? Why?
  - E. What government regulations (if any) impact the organization?
  - F. What mistakes has the organization made in the past? What have these mistakes taught the organization?
  - G. What is the agency's operational budget?
- V. Competitive Posture
  - A. Where does the agency rank in the industry?
  - B. Where does the agency rank in the community?
  - C. What is the agency's reputation?
  - D. Whom does the agency compete with?
  - E. Does the agency have any opponents? If so, who?
  - F. Does the agency have any allies? If so, who?
  - G. Are there important neutral parties to be considered?
  - H. What additional factors are impacting competitive posture?
- VI. Situation Analysis (Trends)
  - A. What are the perceived key changes taking place outside of the organization?

**SIDEBAR 2.2 (Continued)**

- B. What are the perceived key changes taking place within the organization?
- C. What issues are emerging in the industry? How will these impact the agency?
- D. Are there broad social trends impacting the agency?
- E. Are there any developing innovations within the industry that may impact the agency? Is the agency working on any innovations?
- F. Are agency funding sources secure?

- Published documents such as annual reports and newsletters
- Specific records related to the problem, such as memos
- Records regarding organizational calendars of events
- Decision makers and other staff knowledgeable about the issue
- Existing surveys or other research of internal publics
- Websites, listserves, and records related to web use

**External Factors**

Sources of information outside the organization can provide an understanding of opportunities and challenges that the organization needs to anticipate or that it has encountered in the past. Regulations enacted by the Food and Drug Administration to protect the safety of the nation's blood supply, for example, have made it more difficult for prospective blood donors to qualify. People no longer can give blood, for example, if they have had a headache during the past week or if they lived in England for three months between 1980 and 1996. Blood banks must find a way to maintain sufficient reserves under increasingly tight restrictions (Manning, 2003).

Important types of external information include publics who come in contact with the organization, information networks linking individuals inside and outside the organization, portrayals of the organization by key individuals and the media, and information about political, social, economic, and environmental issues that can affect the organization's ability to control an issue. Sources of information include the following:

- Consumer and trade publications in which the organization or the issue is mentioned
- Publications in which competing organizations or their issue positions are mentioned
- Records of broadcast news coverage of the organization or the issue

- Records of Internet sites relevant to the organization or issue
- Individuals and organizations that favor or criticize the organization or its stance on an issue (sometimes an organization has lists of key contacts, friends, or critics)
- Individuals at key media outlets and *bloggers* (writers of web logs) who cover the organization or the issue
- Calendars of events for the community and other relevant regions
- Existing surveys of relevant publics from national, regional, or specialized sources
- Lists of relevant government agencies and key contacts that deal with the organization and relevant issues
- Records of relevant government regulations that are pending, current, and repealed

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Once communication managers have reviewed existing background information, they can assess the situation more effectively. The exercise of drafting the problem statement can reveal information gaps that require further investigation. Only when all of the elements of a problem statement can be written with specifics can the manager determine appropriate strategy.

This means that a significant part of program planning depends on research. The manager's confidence in the effectiveness of a program plan and the manager's ability to demonstrate accountability to a client increases with each bit of relevant information obtained. Public relations programs exist in an environment filled with uncertainty and variables that managers simply cannot control. The better the manager's understanding of all elements of the situation, the more control—or at least predictability—the manager will have over the result of a *communication* program.

# 3

## Elements of the Campaign Recipe

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### Chapter Contents

- Goals
  - Objectives
  - Strategies
  - Tactics
  - The Strategic Planning Ladder
  - Initiating the Planning Process
  - Final Thoughts
- 

After communication managers have performed precampaign research, they can revise the problem statement and situation analysis and go on to design the campaign. Keep in mind that change is constant, thus all planning documents must respond to changes in resources, context, and available information. The manager will revise a problem statement if research demonstrates the initial problem diagnosis overstates, understates, or misstates the problem. Similarly, managers can revise the situation analysis as the situation changes. It follows that the campaign plan, too, may require adjustment occasionally. If, however, you have done thorough precampaign research, the campaign plan rarely will need a major change.

### GOALS

The campaign plan includes at least four levels of information, all presented in writing. The first is the *goal*. A goal is a conceptual statement of what you plan to achieve. The goal is essentially a set of statements that together negate the problem. For example, if the problem for an organization

is a lack of awareness, the goal will focus on increasing awareness. If the problem is a lack of credibility, the goal will focus on increasing credibility. If the problem is a lack of volunteer involvement, a series of goals may focus on recruiting new volunteers, increasing involvement among existing volunteers, and increasing opportunities for volunteer activity. Managers can provide clients with long-term or short-term goals, depending on the context of a program or campaign.

A goal statement includes the following elements:

1. *The word "to."* This signals to the reader that an action statement will follow. It also demonstrates a results orientation. Both of these characteristics make goals easy for busy clients and CEOs to understand quickly.

2. *An active verb.* This demonstrates that a proposed communication plan will have specific effects. The verb should reflect an effect rather than an action. In other words, the goal should not promise to do something such as disseminate newsletters; instead, it should promise to accomplish something, such as improving customer loyalty. Appropriate verbs include increase, decrease, and maintain. Occasionally, others are appropriate, such as initiate or eliminate (Table 3.1).

3. *A conceptual, quantifiable statement of the desired outcome.* This specifies what will be changed and by how much. The focus may be on outcomes such as knowledge, beliefs, opinions, behaviors, sales figures, membership figures, or donation levels. This signals the reader how the manager plans to measure success. As a result, this outcome must be quantifiable in some way. For example, levels of employee satisfaction may be quantified in terms of a combination of sick time, complaints, longevity, work quality, and self-reported opinions. Each proposed measure on its own may not adequately represent employee satisfaction, but as a group they seem appropriate. Each proposed measure will become a stated objective of the campaign. Increasing levels of employee satisfaction, therefore, can be the focus of a goal statement. Each goal should focus on only one outcome. A program designed to change several outcomes should state each outcome as a separate goal.

4. *Identification of relevant target publics.* The client should not only see at a glance what is to be changed but also know among whom it will change. A single communication campaign cannot promise to improve a company's reputation among every individual in the world; the manager must offer some parameters. This will guide the development of strategy, which will differ depending on the target public.

For example, Blockbuster and CIM, Inc., created a Silver Anvil Award-winning campaign to launch video sales of the *Titanic* movie. The Silver Anvil Award is given annually by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) to honor communication programs that incorporate sound research,

**TABLE 3.1**  
Active Verbs Appropriate for Goals and Objectives

Address	Enhance	Persuade	Supply
Administer	Enlarge	Plan	Systematize
Analyze	Enlist	Position	Tabulate
Approve	Establish	Prepare	Teach
Arrange	Evaluate	Present	Tell
Assign	Examine	Preside	Trace
Attain	Expand	Protect	Track
Authorize	Finish	Provide	Train
Build	Gain	Publish	Verify
Calculate	Generate	Raise	Write
Catalog	Govern	Reassure	
Communicate	Group	Recommend	
Complete	Guide	Record	
Conceive	Hire	Recruit	
Conduct	Identify	Rectify	
Confine	Implement	Reduce	
Contract	Improve	Regain	
Control	Increase	Release	
Convince	Index	Remove	
Coordinate	Inform	Request	
Correct	Initiate	Require	
Create	Institute	Research	
Decide	Interview	Reshape	
Decrease	Investigate	Retain	
Delegate	Justify	Review	
Demonstrate	Keep	Revise	
Design	Locate	Schedule	
Develop	Maintain	Secure	
Diminish	Make	Select	
Direct	Moderate	Sort	
Disapprove	Motivate	Start	
Distribute	Negotiate	Stimulate	
Document	Notify	Straighten	
Draft	Obtain	Strengthen	
Earn	Organize	Submit	
Educate	Outline	Summarize	
Employ	Overcome	Supervise	

planning, execution, and evaluation (Sidebar 3.1). Goals for the *Titanic* campaign included, “to capitalize on consumers’ fascination with the *Titanic* to attract customers to Blockbuster Video stores” and “to generate media coverage of Blockbuster’s guaranteed availability of *Titanic*.”

## OBJECTIVES

Although these Blockbuster goals are not *measurable*, they are *quantifiable*. In other words, they cannot count “capitalizing on consumers’ fascination

### **SIDEBAR 3.1**

#### **Campaign Excellence**

#### **A Survey of Silver Anvil Award Winners Compares Current PR Practice With Planning, Campaign Theory**

Each year, thousands of organizations across the United States develop and implement PR campaigns. Some of these campaigns fail. Some are modestly successful, and some achieve smashing success.

Each year, some 650 of these campaigns are submitted for consideration for a Silver Anvil Award, PRSA's recognition of the very best in strategic PR planning and implementation. Of these, about 45 will be awarded the profession's highest recognition. What makes these campaigns so outstanding? Are there common characteristics among Silver Anvil Award-winning campaigns? And can they be identified, interpreted and used to help professionals produce better campaigns for their companies and clients?

These are the questions that a 2002 study of Silver Anvil Award-winning campaigns from 2000 and 2001 sought to answer. This study, which I conducted with Courtney C. Bosworth, Ph.D., assistant professor of advertising and public relations at Florida International University, compares current PR practices in the profession with PR planning and campaign theory. Adding to the study are the observations of some of the profession's leading practitioners—people who judge Silver Anvil entries and, as a result, see the best and worst in PR programming today.

The results are revealing. Although every campaign has practical constraints and technical flaws, campaigns with certain characteristics—notably thorough research and benchmarking, clear objectives, research-based strategies, and documented results—have a good chance of rising to the highest level of campaign excellence. This study of Silver Anvil winners reveals the most common campaign-planning practices of this elite group, as well as shortcomings even great campaigns share that the profession should address in the future.

#### **The Study**

The purpose of the study was to determine if there are any common characteristics of effective PR campaigns. A content analysis of all aspects of PR campaigns was conducted, looking at primary and secondary research methods used, objectives set, communications tactics implemented, and output and outcome evaluation methods reported. In all, some 121 variables typically present in PR campaigns were assessed, used key words and phrases appearing in the two-page summaries of the campaigns.

A random sample of 33 campaigns was analyzed in depth out of winning entries. The campaigns were distributed among the 15 Silver Anvil categories, and among subcategories that included business products, business services, government, associations/nonprofit organizations, and partnerships.

## SIDEBAR 3.1 (Continued)

### Budgets: Myths vs. Realities

There's no question that big-budget programs are well represented among Silver Anvil-winning campaigns. But, according to Lew Carter, managing director for affiliate relations worldwide for Manning, Selvage & Lee, what counts is not the size of the budget, but the way it is used. When asked what distinguishes a great campaign from a typical one, he says, "innovative strategies and the efficient use of budget."

The analysis of winning campaigns bears this out. The largest number of winning entries (29 percent) are not in the highest budget category studied. They are in the \$100,000–\$199,000 budget range—a healthy expenditure but not overly large, especially since most of these campaigns spanned large geographic regions and used innovative tactics to stretch their dollars. The second-highest category is programs of \$500,000 and above (25 percent—these tended to be national or global in scope), while programs in the \$300,000–\$399,000 category rank third (12 percent).

### Research: Critical to Building Strategy

**Judges say that too many campaigns lack solid research.** "I've seen campaigns that seem to contradict the research," says Jennifer Acord, regional manager for public relations and media events for Avon Products Inc. "The best campaigns use research to develop the objectives, create the strategy and provide clear benchmarks for evaluation."

Mitch Head, APR, Fellow PRSA, managing director for Golin/Harris Atlanta and former chair of the Silver Anvil Committee, has also noticed the lack of research.

"Everyone does tactics well," he says. "To me, a great campaign is one that has a great nugget of research that leads to a great strategic approach."

What types of research do award-winning campaigns depend on? Top campaigns depend on primary research techniques that involve personal contact with target audiences. Interviews with, and observations of, key audiences are the most popular form of primary research (65 percent of campaigns used this technique), while telephone surveys rank second (57 percent), focus groups rank third (38 percent), and impersonal mail surveys a distant fourth (12 percent). Internet surveys are used in only 6 percent of campaigns. Fax surveys are definitely out of favor—no campaign reported using this technique.

With secondary research, literature searches (44 percent) and competitive analysis (42 percent) rank as the most frequently used techniques. Used with less frequency are archival research (25 percent), syndicated databases (24 percent), organizational research (24 percent), media audits (22 percent) and sales and market share data (22 percent). General online research is used in 19 percent of campaigns.

When it comes to examining audiences, half of the winning campaigns use demographic profiles. Thirty-three percent use psychographic profiles, while only 13 percent report using geographic profiles.

(Continues)

### SIDEBAR 3.1 (Continued)

Experimental research is done with less frequency. Messages are tested in 37 percent of winning campaigns, while specific communications vehicles are tested in 18 percent of campaigns, media testing occurs in 13 percent of campaigns and products are tested in 6 percent of campaigns.

#### **Benchmarking: Key to Proving Results**

In order to attribute an outcome to the PR campaign, the campaign must be benchmarked. However, after studying the type of benchmarking research typically done prior to the launch of a campaign, even some of the top campaigns came up short.

“The thing that distinguishes the great campaigns is that they ‘move the needle’—and are able to clearly show that it is public relations that did the heavy lifting,” says Christopher K. Veronda, APR, manager of communications and public affairs for Eastman Kodak Company and a longtime Silver Anvil judge.

Only 45 percent of campaigns benchmark awareness prior to launch. This is significant because 79 percent of the campaigns seek to increase awareness, meaning 34 percent of the campaigns seeking to increase awareness fail to establish their starting point. Other types of benchmark research done include benchmarking perceptions (41 percent benchmarked perceptions, while 63 percent of campaigns sought to change perceptions), attitudes (40 percent benchmarked/12 percent sought to change) and opinions (27 percent benchmarked/28 percent sought to change).

#### **Objectives: What Are We Trying to Do?**

The most important aspect of a campaign is the objective, says Gerard F. Corbett, APR, Fellow PRSA, chairman of PRSA’s 2003 Honors and Awards Committee and vice president of Hitachi America, Ltd. “You need to identify where you want to be at the end of the day and what needs to be accomplished when all is said and done,” he says.

Four out of five Silver Anvil campaigns studied sought to change behavior. And yet, in order to change behavior, a hierarchy of effects must occur that involves the creation of awareness, informing and educating audiences, changing opinions (persuading) and changing attitudes.

The campaigns studied did not systematically set multiple objectives to reflect the process of behavior change. Although 82 percent had behavior-based objectives and 79 percent had awareness- and visibility-based objectives, only 28 percent had opinion-based objectives and only 12 percent had attitude-based objectives. Practitioners might consider working backward—identifying the behavior objective for the campaign, then thinking through the attitude-change, opinion-change and awareness-change objectives necessary to produce the behavior.

## SIDEBAR 3.1 (Continued)

### How Well Are Objectives Written?

Judges agree that poorly written objectives are one of the top reasons campaigns are eliminated from Silver Anvil competition. Among the ones that win, however, what does the study find?

Winning campaigns still reveal gaps that should be addressed by the profession. While 96 percent show a clear tie to the organization's mission and goals and 75 percent specify the nature of the desired change, only 43 percent specify the time frame for the change and only 35 percent specify the amount of change sought. In order for objectives to be adequately expressed and, ultimately, an outcome to be measured, all four elements must be present.

"Many losing Silver Anvil entries did not have the kind of objectives that can later be measured and evaluated," says Catherine Pacheco, APR, president of Pacheco Rodriguez Public Relations. "Once we read the first half of the entry and find this wanting, we know the last half will be worse. After all, how can you possibly measure the success of a campaign if you do not clearly specify what you are out to achieve?"

### Measuring Results

While the results are the most important aspect of a good campaign, judges say that too often entries will only demonstrate the number of clips, meetings held, and the like, instead of evaluating the impact of the program and actions taken by relevant audiences.

It is accepted in the profession today that assessing bottom-line results, or outcomes, is more important than assessing campaign activities, or outputs. The study shows a wide variety of both types of evaluation taking place.

Top output evaluation methods include documentation of messages placed in the media (73 percent of campaigns), documentation of participation in events or activities (62 percent), documentation of the number of campaign events implemented (52 percent) and documentation of content of messages placed (50 percent). "I see thinly veiled attempts (in losing entries) to gauge the success of a campaign solely based on the number of news clips that are generated," Pacheco. "If it's one of several markers, that's great, but to call a campaign a best practice, it better contain other measurements of success than just clips."

In the more important arena of outcome evaluation, 87 percent of campaigns document behavior change. However, only 24 percent document attitude change and only 18 percent document opinion change—both necessary precursors of behavior change, unless a latent desire to behave in the desired direction already exists in the target audiences. This suggests that the profession should pay closer attention to evaluating opinion and attitude change after a campaign is implemented, in order to more fully understand if the behavior was produced as the result of communication effects or some other factor.

(Continues)

### SIDEBAR 3.1 (Continued)

To do so is a struggle, however, when companies or clients, satisfied with the results of a campaign, will not offer additional funds for follow-up research. Practitioners should be prepared to argue that such research will add to the company's knowledge base and, in the long run, pay off with more efficient use of dollars in future campaigns.

Interestingly, 75 percent of campaigns document that the audience received the intended message and 67 percent document that the audience understood the message, but only 12 percent document that the audience retained the message. This suggests more attention should be given to documenting the long-term effects of communication efforts on the intended audiences.

#### **The X Factor: Does It Exist?**

Asked whether there is an "X" factor that sets excellent campaigns apart from those that are merely good, solid ones, the overwhelming response from Silver Anvil judges is yes. But that factor, they say, ranges from daring creative approaches to solid implementation.

"What distinguishes a great campaign is a genuinely creative approach to a worthy challenge that is executed flawlessly and yields significant, measurable results," says Pat Pollino, APR, Fellow PRSA, and vice president for marketing and communication for Mercer Management Consulting, Inc. "To borrow an analogy from pro football, anyone can diagram a power sweep, but it takes a team like Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers to pull it off successfully."

A dramatic or daring approach sets outstanding campaigns apart, says Head. Dreaming up something creative is "hard to do in this day and age, when everything seems to have already been done," he says.

Corbett agrees and further defines the X factor that winning campaigns share.

"The great campaigns are those that are strategic in nature, have a well-defined goal, are very targeted and have results that stand out like a crystal in the sun," says Corbett. "I believe that there is an X factor, although it is difficult to discern at first glance. It is the chemistry that makes the program gel. It could be an out-of-the-box idea; it could be the people involved or the manner in which the campaign was implemented. Or it could be many factors woven together like a resilient fabric."

Veronda doesn't believe there is an X factor. "It's solid implementation of the four-step process," he says. "Some of our critics would say you should just look at results, but to show it was public relations that moved the needle, you had to do the upfront research and establish the benchmarks."

The best public relations does not impress the reader as merely public relations, but approaches the business problem of the organization, says Clarke Caywood, Ph.D., graduate professor of integrated marketing communications at Northwestern University. "It uses the richness of the field to solve problems and create new opportunities to increase revenues or reduce costs and contribute to the triple bottom line of social, environmental and financial

### SIDEBAR 3.1 (Continued)

security of the organization, its employees, investors and other stakeholders," he says.

But bottom-line results, he says, is the X factor. "I'd like to know how behavior was changed. For example, did sales increase? Was there greater turnout at an event? What I want to know is how the PR program made a difference for the organization."

#### Final Thoughts on Campaign Planning

The bottom line for campaign planning? Focus on those aspects of campaign planning that will help you achieve your goal. Do good, solid research that benchmarks your starting point; use that research to build your strategy; set complete objectives that specify type, amount, and time frame for change; and document your outcomes. Sprinkle in a heavy dose of creativity, both in problem-solving and tactical execution, and efficient use of funding, and you are well on your way to producing an outstanding PR campaign.

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From "A Survey of Silver Anvil Award Winners Compares Current PR Practice With Planning, Campaign Theory," *Public Relations Strategist*, by C. B. Ahles, 2003 (Summer).

with the *Titanic*," which is an idea, but they can count things that represent that idea, such as the number of people who come to Blockbuster as a result of a *Titanic* promotion. They cannot count "media coverage," per se, but they can count the number of articles, column inches, and minutes of broadcast that mention the movie and Blockbuster together. Nager and Allen (1984) wrote that it helps to think of a goal as a *directional statement*, such as planning to "go north." You cannot ever "arrive" at "north," because north is an idea, a concept. It is relative to where you are now, or where you used to be, or where you will be some other time. So you have to supply some context if you want to turn the direction into some sort of destination so that you will be able to say, "I have arrived!" You can go north from someplace, and you can go specific places located in a northerly direction, but to know you have done it right, you need to give yourself some checkpoints. You need to know where you are starting out—known in communication campaigns as the *baseline*—and you need to know where you want to end up—known as the *objective*.

If the goal has promised to “improve employee morale,” the manager will have created a directional statement but will not yet have any concrete destinations to guide campaign planning and provide accountability. You never will arrive at “improving morale.” You can, however, find things to measure that will represent improvements in morale, just as you can find cities that represent north. These things that you measure—your destinations—will serve as your objectives.

In the Blockbuster example, the outcomes for the goals include connecting use of Blockbuster stores with the *Titanic* movie and connecting media coverage of the movie with its availability at Blockbuster. The manager cannot count either of these outcomes. To quantify these ideas, such as media coverage, you might count the number of news stories that contain references to both the movie and the video store. Or you might count the number of on-air promotions and contests connecting the movie and its availability at Blockbuster. To measure high visibility, you might count the number of news stories that make the front page of the entertainment section of the newspaper, or you might be satisfied with the number of stories that make it into the news at all. All of these would be *measurable outcomes*, or destinations, for your image and visibility campaign.

An objective, then, is a measurable destination that represents the achievement of a campaign goal. Much confusion exists regarding objectives, most likely because several types of objectives exist. Many communication managers, for example, write conceptual statements (goals) and call them objectives. A true objective, however, is specific and measurable, stating not what the campaign will do, but rather what a campaign will accomplish. Three types of objectives exist.

*Global objectives* focus on general program outcomes. They summarize the overall effect of a campaign. For example, a global objective might be to obtain the necessary legislative support to enable a company to proceed with a planned expansion. Although concrete—the expansion either proceeds or does not—the objective does not specify the details that have to be in place for the expansion to take place. For example, the company needs to have enough sympathetic legislators win election or re-election in the next election. In addition, someone has to write and introduce the legislation. Advocacy groups with alternative views need to be persuaded or countered. These process-oriented or task-oriented outcomes are known as *intermediate objectives*. Finally, the campaign may state *terminal objectives*, which provide specific measurable or observable results to the campaign, measured by behaviors or actions, such as at least 51 senators voting for the passage of a particular bill.

An objective must include the following elements:

1. *The word “to.”* This signals that a promise of accountability follows.
2. *An active verb.* As before, this indicates that something specific will happen as a result of the communication program (Table 3.2; see Table 3.1).

**TABLE 3.2**  
Active Verbs Appropriate for Objectives

Administer	Finish	Reduce
Approve	Gain	Regain
Assign	Generate	Request
Attain	Hire	Retain
Authorize	Implement	Schedule
Catalog	Improve	Secure
Complete	Increase	Select
Conduct	Institute	Start
Create	Interview	Submit
Decrease	Locate	Tabulate
Develop	Make	
Distribute	Obtain	
Draft	Present	
Earn	Provide	
Employ	Publish	
Enlarge	Raise	
Enlist	Record	
Establish	Recruit	

Note. You can insert a number after each verb to indicate a specific, measurable amount of change.

3. *The “criterion outcome” or measurable destination.* This puts the focus on a concrete “operationalization” of the idea presented in a goal. This outcome must be measurable or reliably observable. Each objective focuses on a single criterion outcome, which means that several objectives may correspond to quantify a single goal statement. The wording of the criterion outcome must make clear what measurement technique is required for accountability. For example, an objective promising “to increase self-reported confidence in the institution” by a certain amount requires a survey; an objective pledging “to increase the number of participants in professional development seminars by 20%” requires an attendance record.

4. *The relevant target public.* Some objectives, such as those focused on raising awareness, may not be relevant to all target publics in a campaign. Therefore, to avoid overpromising, specify which objectives relate to which publics.

5. *The amount of change expected.* This critical piece of information distinguishes the objective from the goal by providing concrete verification of goal attainment. This can take the form of a number or a percentage. The amount of designated change must be ambitious enough to require real improvement but also be realistically attainable. Stating too high a level can impress a client in a pitch meeting but can make a competent campaign look like a failure. Understating the level can lead a client to think the campaign will be a sham and not worth the investment. As a result, objectives

are difficult to write. However effective the campaign strategies may be, the objectives ultimately determine whether a campaign is a success or a failure.

How much change is necessary or realistic can be determined only through research and still may require the best judgment of the communication manager. In addition, objectives sometimes may require negotiation, particularly when they are set on the basis of political judgments or intuition instead of on the basis of research. Sometimes clients impose minimum levels of change, and sometimes these levels are not realistic. The Washington State Legislature, for example, determined in 1997 that all state universities had to improve student retention and graduation rates by specified amounts. The universities knew that they would not be able to achieve the amounts. Ironically, the ability to achieve some of the stated objectives, such as decreasing time until graduation, would be compromised by increases in enrollment and retention, which were the focus of other objectives. The university administrators knew that many students drop out or change institutions because they are struggling, thus keeping them from leaving would probably hurt overall time-to-graduation rates. The universities' challenge, as a result, was to make their best effort to achieve the stated objectives while acquiring evidence to convince the legislators that alternative objectives would be more appropriate. Although the universities had to sacrifice some state funding because they failed to meet the original objectives, they were successful in guiding the legislature to more reasonable objectives during the next legislative session.

6. *A target date or deadline.* This seals the promise of accountability and is an essential element of the objective.

Note how concrete and specific the objective is. Many managers find objectives discomfiting because they represent a clear promise. Objectives state in no uncertain terms what will be accomplished and by when. The obvious danger is promising too much. The manager, however, has only two viable alternatives: make promises that can be kept or make no promises. Because promises provide accountability, they make or break your reputation. To make no promises in a bottom-line—oriented environment keeps public relations marginalized and powerless. As a result, the only choice for the successful communication manager is to make promises that can be kept. The only way to do this—to determine realistic objectives—is through research. Blockbuster was able to set objectives and develop strategy based on continuing market research of theater attendance and video sales, customers' video rental and purchase habits, the usefulness of incentives, and the attraction of "being among the first" to buy the movie. It also used the movie attendance research to determine the target audience, which was dominated by young females. More sample outcomes appear in Table 3.3.

TABLE 3.3

Examples of Communication Program Outcomes (from 2004 Silver Anvil Award Winners)

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Goal:	To build anticipation and excitement for the opening of Wild Reef in April 2003.
Objective:	To increase the awareness of local residents and tourists by 20% that Wild Reef was opening in April.
Objective:	To increase annual attendance by 10%.
Goal:	To achieve public awareness of the location, concept and content of the King Library among the general public and the University community.
Objective:	To attract 300-500 guests to a black-tie gala and 10,000 to the dedication/community celebration.
Objective:	To entice 700,000 visitors to the library by December 31, 2003 – 100,000 more than normal at the old libraries.
Goal:	To dramatically expand consumer base without losing share from core consumers.
Objective:	To generate 250 million gross media impressions among mainstream consumers in 2003.
Objective:	To maintain 82% market share among core consumers in the natural foods channel during campaign.
Objective:	To use public relations to increase Silk sales to \$300 million in 2003.

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Note. “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library—Check It Out!,” City of San Jose and San Jose State University, “Selling More Without Selling Out: Keeping Soymilk Cool,” C. L. Spong & White Wave, “Shedd Sharks Go Wild,” Shedd Aquarium, Public Communications Inc.

## Objectives Drive Evaluation

Every objective, if written properly, necessitates some form of evaluation and dictates the form the evaluation should take. In the case of Blockbuster’s *Titanic* promotional campaign, some of the objectives included the following:

- To develop a promotion/special event that attracts at least 500,000 customers to Blockbuster throughout the United States and encourage them to purchase or rent *Titanic* at Blockbuster sooner than at other video stores
- To obtain at least \$2 million in free media exposure for Blockbuster during the launch
- To determine how many customers came to Blockbuster stores as a result of the *Titanic* promotion

Blockbuster was able to count the number of people who attended the special midnight launch of *Titanic* video sales, including the number who lined up around the block ahead of time. Blockbuster counted the average transaction amount during the sale, which increased 321% over that of a normal business day. It also did research, which established that nearly 50% of consumers who purchased the movie during the event would not

have done so if the store hours had not been extended. To determine how much media coverage was worth, Blockbuster applied a formula to the print and video coverage of the event, which it estimated at \$9 million.

### **The Importance of Coordinating Objectives With Evaluation**

The objective should signal the appropriate form of evaluation. As an example of coordinating objectives with evaluation, the American Medical Women's Association (AMWA) and Fleishman Hillard, Inc., teamed up to increase awareness, diagnosis, and treatment of thyroid disease. The campaign took place in response to figures indicating that more than half of the estimated 13 million Americans with thyroid disease, most of whom are women, remain undiagnosed. Untreated, thyroid disease can cause cholesterol problems, osteoporosis, and infertility. Meanwhile, a simple blood test can detect the disease, and treatment is straightforward. As a result, AMWA and Fleishman Hillard's stated objective was to increase the number of women being tested for thyroid disease by at least 10% in the first 15 months of the campaign. This objective dictated that campaign success would depend on tracking figures of women tested for thyroid disease. The campaign documented an increase of more than 40% in the number of women tested. The campaign included other measures of success as well, such as the number of total prescriptions of thyroid treatment medication, which increased by 10% and indicated that more women were being treated for thyroid disease.

The campaign had several associated results as well. More than 6,600 individuals were screened during local market screening events, at a rate of more than 300 people per hour. AMWA and Fleishman Hillard achieved exposure to more than 100 million people with media coverage that included national coverage on television shows such as *Good Morning America*, CNN, Fox, and MSNBC; national coverage in print venues such as the Associated Press, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and several magazines; and local print and broadcast coverage in various markets. A television public service announcement was broadcast 3,800 times, reaching an estimated 128 million viewers. A radio public service announcement reached an estimated 40 million listeners. The campaign also brought the issue to the attention of Congress through invited testimony and visits to four key Congressional members' home districts. These achievements, however striking, would not in themselves demonstrate campaign success as promised. If the stated objective promises behavior change in the form of increased blood tests, success must be measured in those terms.

It may seem unfair that a campaign might achieve results but still seem like a failure if the ultimate objective is not met. This makes it especially useful to include intermediate and terminal objectives along with global

objectives for a campaign. In the case of the thyroid disorder campaign, an appropriate global objective would be to track treatment of thyroid disease and the incidences of related osteoporosis, cholesterol problems, and birth defects, which the campaign managers documented. An appropriate terminal objective would be to increase testing, which the campaign planners documented. Appropriate intermediate objectives would include media impressions, congressional hearings, and local screening successes, which they also documented. Even if the ultimate campaign objectives had not been met, the campaign managers would be able to show that progress had been made and that future efforts might have more striking results. Indeed, the success of the thyroid campaign led to a campaign expansion that attracted the collaboration of additional health organizations.

## STRATEGIES

Apparent success depends on how objectives are stated. Actual success depends on the competent use of appropriate *strategy*. If the goal represents the direction we plan to go and the objective represents destinations at which we plan to arrive, then strategies represent how we plan to get there. A *strategy* is a statement of the communication themes or vehicles that will be used to accomplish a specific objective. It represents an overall plan of action that will tie together each action taken to implement the campaign. The communication manager constructs strategies based on the following elements:

1. *Available data*. This includes the situation analysis and all the research that has gone into creating it. It also includes the manager's knowledge from previous experience with an organization and with communication campaigns. In the case of the thyroid campaign, available data included research by Fleishman Hillard with consumers, health care professionals, media, managed care organizers, professional societies, and consumer groups. It found that only 30% of women had been tested for thyroid disease in 1996, that nearly 90% of people did not know that thyroid problems could do things such as elevate cholesterol levels, and that although half of all women experienced three or more symptoms associated with a thyroid disorder 75% of them did not discuss the symptoms with a doctor.

2. *Communication and public relations principles*. This includes knowledge of the public relations function and its parameters. Fleishman Hillard knew it could help by boosting public awareness, bringing the issue to the attention of Congress, and promoting testing among individuals at risk (women). It had expertise in all of these areas of promotion.

3. *Communication and persuasion theories*. The body of knowledge in the social sciences can provide you with the ability to make hypotheses, or likely informed guesses, about the types of strategies that will accomplish

the stated objective and be relevant to a situation. Social science theories are essentially explanations of how and why things happen the way they do. In short, theories can tell you how people are likely to react to your campaign and why.

In the case of the thyroid campaign, Fleishman Hillard realized that the problem was a lack of awareness instead of active resistance to testing. People demonstrated they did not know much about the importance of the thyroid gland, its effects, or how easy it was to diagnose and treat thyroid problems. As a result, Fleishman Hillard knew it needed to build knowledge. It also knew from persuasion theories that people are more likely to take action if they understand the relevance of an issue and if they can see that taking action is both easy and effective. As a result, Fleishman Hillard developed three related strategies:

1. Build consumer knowledge, particularly among women, about the thyroid gland's function and effect on the body.
2. Humanize thyroid disease by demonstrating its effect on quality of life and risks to long-term health.
3. Demonstrate the ease and simplicity of a sensitive thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) test to detect thyroid dysfunction.

## TACTICS

These strategies, of course, are ideas for guidance instead of a list of actions to implement. They are, in fact, counterparts to goals, which are ideas about campaign results. The communication campaign, therefore, also must include an action counterpart to the objective. These are called *tactics* and are the tasks that must be accomplished to achieve a stated objective. The tactics are the specifics of your recipe. They are, essentially, job assignments. Tactics include the following:

- The task
- Parties responsible for completing the task
- Deadline for completion of the task

Tactics include the development of specific communication vehicles, such as public service announcements, logos, brochures, training materials, and special events. For Fleishman Hillard, the tactics included development of an engaging theme, identification of a celebrity spokesperson (Gail Devers, the Olympic gold medalist who had suffered with undiagnosed thyroid problems for 3 years), development of high-profile events that attract both national and local media coverage, implementation of special events such as a VIP breakfast to bring the spokesperson and physicians

together with key members of Congress, a free TSH testing event on Capitol Hill, and more. Each stated tactic related to a specific strategy that was designed to achieve a stated objective, which demonstrated the accomplishment of a stated goal.

### THE STRATEGIC PLANNING LADDER

As the thyroid campaign illustrates, the campaign plan becomes a tightly organized set of specific tasks that put carefully selected strategies into action to accomplish stated objectives representing organizational goals that enable an organization to achieve its mission. To make sure all elements of the campaign plan are necessary and appropriate, it helps to think of the progression of specificity as a ladder (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2). When going up the ladder, such as considering the appropriateness of a tactic, ask “Why are we doing this?” In other words, does every action have a stated purpose?

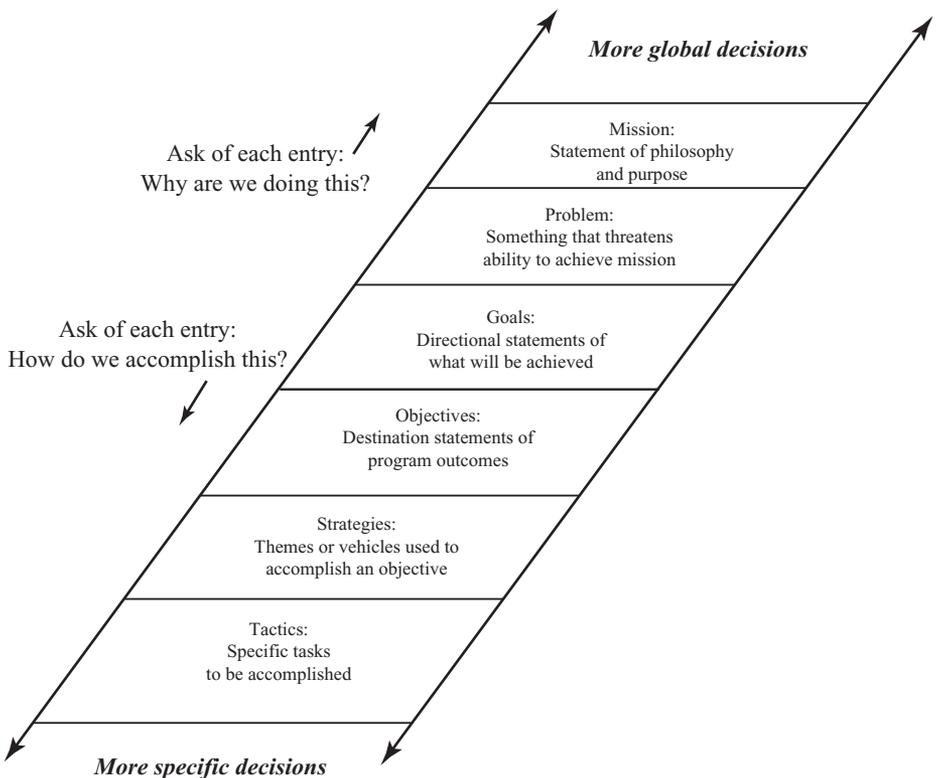


FIG. 3.1. The strategic planning ladder. How the mission, problem statements, goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics relate to one another.

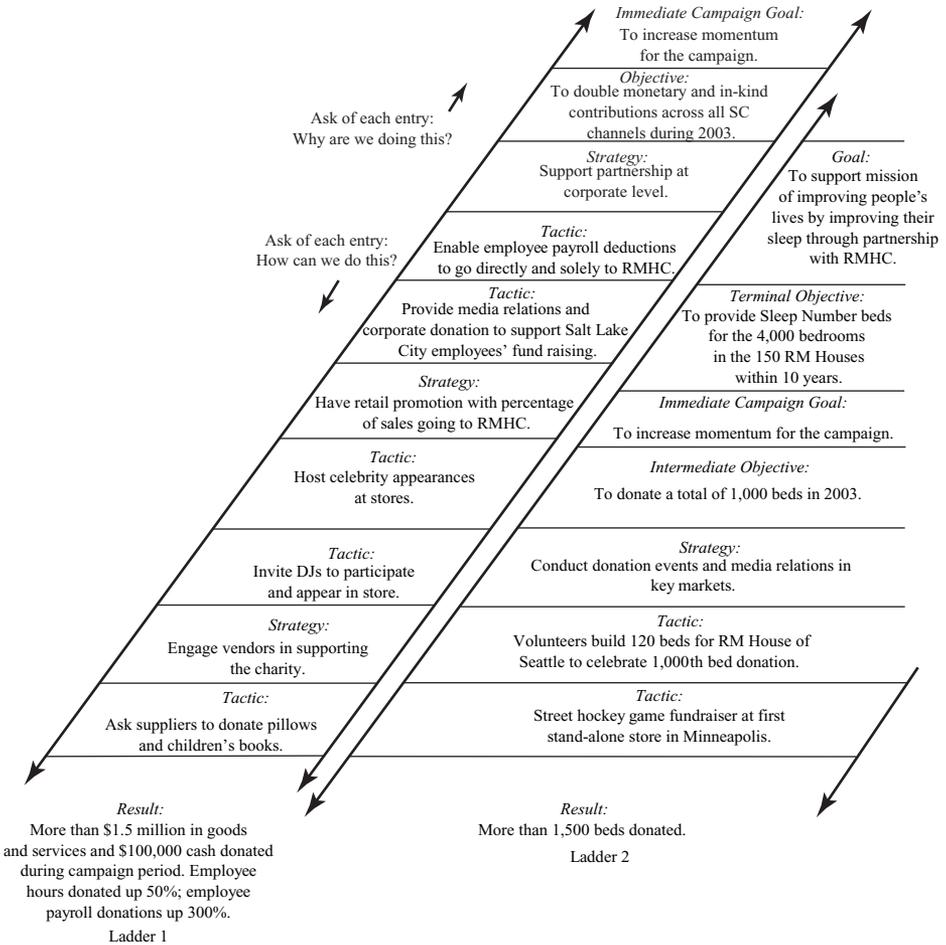


FIG. 3.2. The strategic planning ladder. Examples of how goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics relate to one another as demonstrated by the "Catching ZZs for Charity" campaign implemented by Select Comfort and Carmichael Lynch Spong in 2003. A communication program may have a number of interrelated "ladders." RM, Ronald McDonald; RMHC, Ronald McDonald House Charities; SC, Select Comfort.

The answer to the why question for a tactic should be a strategy. The answer for a strategy should be an objective. The answer for an objective should be a goal, and the answer for a goal should be the problem, to which the answer is the mission. Why do we need to produce a brochure? Because we need to provide information to potential applicants to spark their interest and gain their confidence. Why do we need an informational campaign? Because we need to increase applications from this target public

by 30%. Why do we need to increase applications? Because we want to increase representation from this target public in our program. Why do we want to increase their representation? Because our organization strives to serve the entire community, and they have not been represented in the same proportion in which they exist in the community.

In reverse, going down the ladder, the manager should ask “How will we accomplish this?” To solve a problem requires a goal statement. To achieve the goal requires objectives. To meet the objectives requires a strategy, and each strategy requires tactics to put it into action. How can we increase representation of the target public in our program? We can increase the number of applications by the next deadline date. How can we increase the applications? We can develop an information campaign targeting interested community members from the target group. How can we implement the campaign? Among other things, we can develop brochures.

### INITIATING THE PLANNING PROCESS

The communication program plan represents the culmination of much research, analysis, and expertise. Sometimes it can be difficult to determine where to begin the planning process. Client representatives may have nonspecific or conflicting ideas, and communication personnel may have varying interests in and interpretations of the issue as well. As a result, it can be useful to begin the planning process with an old-fashioned brainstorming session. Several brainstorming techniques exist. One especially effective strategy is called *story boarding*.

Story boarding, originally developed by the Walt Disney Corp. to design *Steamboat Willie*, is a highly visible, highly interactive way of gathering and sorting ideas. *Story boarding* refers to the process of creating the story that will guide strategic planning. In effect, it is a way to approach the process of analyzing the situation and identifying the strengths and opportunities that will inform decision making. Besides helping participants work through a problem, the technique provides a mechanism for tracking the decision-making process so others can see how collaborators arrived at a final decision. This gives confidence to participants who can be reminded of the factors that produced a decision, and it adds credibility to the decisions made because they are based on clearly presented evidence.

Managers can use story boards for four purposes:

1. *Planning* is used to outline the steps required to reach a specific result, such as preparing for a special event.
2. *Idea* is used to develop a concept or a theme for a specific purpose.
3. *Communication* is used to determine who needs to know something, what they need to know, and how best to interact with them.

4. *Organization* is used to determine who will take responsibility for designated tasks, and how to work together as departments, individuals, or organizations to accomplish a plan.

Story boarding uses a facilitated creative thinking process to guide brainstorming. The process includes three stages of idea generation, critical review, and consensus building to create a shared vision of a plan. It is a little like a focus group, requiring a facilitator to guide discussion and encourage freedom of thought. During the idea-generation stage, participants offer ideas for issues such as the who, what, where, when, why, and how of a problem; the identification of important target publics, opportunities, and constraints for a campaign; and the creation of campaign themes. Each idea is noted on an index card, which gets pinned or taped onto walls or tackable surfaces. During critical review, the group sifts through ideas to organize, refine, and prioritize them. Finally, during consensus building, the participants try to arrive at an agreement for the plan, idea, communication strategy, or organization. The rules for the creative thinking process include the following:

- The more ideas, the better
- No criticism
- Hitchhiking is good (triggering ideas from others' ideas)
- Spelling does not count
- Handwriting does not count
- One idea per card
- Yell out each idea during brainstorming

This technique helped the state of Washington develop a campaign focused on alcohol abuse prevention that required the cooperation of a wide spectrum of individuals from organizations with various agendas and perspectives. Representatives from the Department of Alcohol and Substance Abuse (DASA), the Governor's budgeting office, the state liquor control board, the public schools, higher education, and other organizations all gathered to determine how to focus the campaign and how to assign responsibilities. Beginning from DASA's stated goal, to "teach that alcohol is a drug," participants shared their personal experience, knowledge of research, and awareness of practical constraints such as how to ensure the cooperation of important stakeholders. The discussion gradually identified an agreed-upon target group: parents of children younger than the usual age of first experimentation. From there, the group developed an action plan for developing benchmark and formative research, which led to development of campaign materials.

The research for the campaign included a statewide survey of parents with children between the ages of 3 and 10 that would serve as a benchmark for later evaluation and would provide useful information for media relations activities. It also included a series of focus groups used to test the proposed message strategies (See Chapter 8).

The goal of the campaign was to educate parents of young children about talking to their kids about alcohol at an early age. A process goal was to equip parents with the knowledge and awareness that they can be the most significant source of help in influencing their children's attitudes and behavior toward responsible drinking habits. Objectives included distributing 100,000 informational brochures to parents over a 2-year period, increasing awareness of an "alcohol is a drug" message among Washington parents by 10% each year over a 2-year period, securing statewide media commitments to run \$250,000 of pro bono advertising in support of the campaign each year, increasing by 10% the number of Washington parents who rank alcohol use by kids as a "serious problem," and increasing by 10% the awareness of "the harmful effects of alcohol use by children."

The strategy for the campaign included the development of a multiyear, multimedia statewide campaign focusing on increasing parents' knowledge that alcohol is a drug and that they can be the most powerful deterrent and source of help to their children regarding potential alcohol use. The strategy also included securing cooperative funding sources to sustain the campaign for 2 years; to maintain high visibility through the use of public relations and media relations activities throughout the campaign; and to coordinate all campaign activities at state, county, and local levels to ensure a successful launch.

The five primary tactics for the campaign included implementing the statewide surveys; developing three distinctly different conceptual treatments of the "alcohol is a drug" theme; obtaining commitments from magazines, newspapers, newsletters, television stations, and radio stations; developing a poster and a parent guide; and securing co-op partners.

The campaign achieved its objectives, distributing 103,265 informational brochures to parents over a 2-year period, increasing awareness from 53% to 62% (an increase of 17%), and securing more than \$250,000 of pro bono advertising in support of the campaign. The campaign did not greatly increase the percentage of Washington parents who were "extremely concerned" about alcohol use by kids and considered it a "serious problem," which already was at 45% and averaged 5.8 on a 7-point scale. The number of parents who mentioned alcohol as the "most used drug" by children increased by 13%, rising from 46% to 52% among parents who recalled the campaign. The postcampaign survey demonstrated that 72% of parents saw or heard one of the public service advertisements produced for the campaign.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The DASA campaign embodied all of the essential elements of scientific program planning, from the development of the situation analysis at the beginning of the campaign to the demonstration of accountability at the end of the campaign. The use of careful research and a clear plan ensured that every campaign tactic fulfilled a necessary strategy and that every strategy responded to a desired objective. Every objective realized a relevant goal, and the goals took aim at the problem of underage drinking. The clarity of the MBO process makes it easy for an outside observer to understand the purpose of the campaign, the reasons for actions taken in pursuit of campaign goals, and the results achieved at campaign's end. The MBO technique cannot guarantee success for the practitioner, but the focus it provides will make success a more likely outcome. Because of its overt emphasis on accountability, the MBO technique also makes an achievement impossible to dismiss.

# 4

## Determining Research Needs: Developing the Research Plan

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### Chapter Contents

- The Role of Research
  - The Benefits of Research
  - Specific Research Functions
  - Elements of a Research Plan
  - Determining Research Needs
  - Determining and Understanding Target Publics
  - Determining Program Outcomes
  - Testing Communication Channels
  - Testing the Message
  - Testing the Information Sources
  - Developing a Research Strategy
  - Developing a Realistic Research Proposal
  - Final Thoughts
- 

Now you know that you need to develop an effective communication plan and that to do this you need to develop strategies that will achieve stated objectives. To arrive at this plan, a communication manager needs to apply what Lloyd Kirban, executive vice president and director of research for Burson–Marsteller in New York (Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 21), called “informed creativity.” The role of research is to focus brainstorming, confirm or disconfirm hunches, and help fine-tune your strategies (Sidebar 4.1).

## **SIDEBAR 4.1**

### **Confessions of a Silver Anvil Judge**

The Silver Anvil is the most prestigious award a public relations professional can win. But it doesn't come easy.

This year, I had the privilege of serving as a judge for the PRSA Silver Anvil awards. As a marketing strategist and researcher with more than 25 years in the business, I have judged numerous competitions.

The Silver Anvil award selection process is as good as or better than any other professional awards program. And the winning entries were all worthy of the awards bestowed upon them.

What concerns me, however, is the quality of the entries that did not win Silver Anvils. In some cases, they were so far off in conveying a strong program, that one might conclude that many industry professionals need to revisit what constitutes a successful public relations program.

The entry criteria for the Silver Anvils is very specific, requiring documentation in four major areas: research, planning, execution and results. To win an award, an agency must demonstrate that its entry delivered in all four areas.

#### **WHERE IS RESEARCH?**

Many agencies failed to quantify their entry's contribution to each of the four areas. Research was clearly the area with the most room for improvement. Several submissions stretched the definition and in the process devalued the role that research can play in defining the goals and target audience of a public relations program.

For example, many entries seemed to support the notion that research consists of talking to a few editors about their perception of a company and its products. Other submissions relied heavily on what a top executive said was important to the progress of the product or company. While media soundings and senior executive interviews can be important factors in determining the parameters of a public relations effort, they do not begin to go far enough in terms of research.

A strategic public relations program will address the audience that is relevant to the public relations campaign. Many campaigns have multiple audiences, including end users, employees, members, investors, suppliers, and government officials. Research, when properly utilized, will define the target audience of the campaign and help set priorities.

It will often delineate the existing perceptions, needs and opinions of the program's target audience. Research initiatives should link this understanding to the marketing and brand situation of the product or company. In the process, it should provide a benchmark from which to judge the impact of the public relations program.

## SIDEBAR 4.1 (Continued)

### WHAT ARE THE GOALS?

Not every research effort has to be extensive or expensive. We have developed a number of quick and relatively inexpensive research tools to use when resources are limited. They include qualitative samples, in-house research panels and sophisticated analysis of existing data.

The planning stage is the second area addressed on the entry form.

Here, the most frequent problem was that the choice of goals and objectives was not justified against the clients' business goals. A public relations program should be developed to support the broader needs of the client, with emphasis on corporate reputation and brand building.

The program goals should be articulated in a manner that enables the client to easily evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Many of the entries did not provide any way to quantify progress made towards the program' objectives—making it impossible to evaluate whether or not the program achieved its goals.

The classic example is a statement indicating that a program was designed to "establish the company as a leader." Again, the lack of documentation leads one to question the relevance of a program based upon poorly articulated goals and objectives.

### WHERE'S THE SUPPORT?

The third area addressed on the Silver Anvil entry form is the execution of the public relations program. This was where the real fun began.

Copies of press kits, videotapes, audiotapes, and collateral of all kinds filled submissions binders to the brim. The problem for many entries, however, was the lack of information regarding how promotional material supported the program's key messages.

Material generated by the creative team often demonstrated a complete disconnection between the creative and strategic elements of a program. The material looked slick but failed to convey key messages to the target audience. Lavish creative efforts on behalf of a low-budget campaign points to a lack of planning and poor execution on the part of the staff responsible for the program. It may be hard to imagine, but it is possible overspend on production!

The final area on the Silver Anvil entry form is program results.

Stating that top management "liked the program" hardly constitutes results befitting a Silver Anvil award winner. To most professionals, letters received from the sales force or customers are also insufficient to be considered for an award.

(Continues)

### SIDEBAR 4.1 (Continued)

#### WHAT IS SUCCESS?

After opening several submissions that included clip reports as proof of a program's impact, I was forced to wonder how some public relations professionals are measuring success. Clips are an indicator of interest on the part of the media, not necessarily of influence on the purchasing behavior or attitudes of the public.

To be considered a successful public relations program, there must be evidence that the goals and objectives of a program have been met. For instance, if the stated goal of a program is to raise brand awareness, the public relations agency needs to provide documentation demonstrating that the goal was achieved. A brand awareness survey conducted before and after the public relations campaign would clearly illustrate whether the brand experienced increased consumer recognition or not.

Some other examples of quantifiable objectives are a 5% increase in sales, 10,000 new hits a month at the company Web site or one million dollars donated to a nonprofit organization.

Not every public relations program is well suited to the Silver Anvil awards. Entries are intended to represent the best a public relations program has to offer in a given year. Submissions that are clearly lacking in one of the four entry criteria devalue not only the awards, but also the public relations industry itself.

Programs that win Silver Anvils almost always demonstrate a tight linkage between the goals of the business and the program results. Failing to do that, other efforts will remain nothing more than submissions.

From "Confessions of a Silver Anvil Judge," by L. Chiagouris, 1998 (Winter), *Public Relations Strategist*, 74, pp. 29–31.

Permission granted by *Public Relations Strategist*, a quarterly publication of the Public Relations Society of America.

### THE ROLE OF RESEARCH

Because the strategic manager is goal oriented, the decision to do research depends on its relevance to program goals and an organization's mission. In other words, research should be goal oriented, like the program plan itself. "Doing research" may seem intimidating to those without a social science background, but research spans a range of activities, many of which managers do instinctively. What does it mean to do research, and what are the goals of research? Research is systematic listening used in an attempt to reduce uncertainty. The goal of research is to gain maximum control of the things that can be controlled and maximum understanding of the things that cannot be controlled.

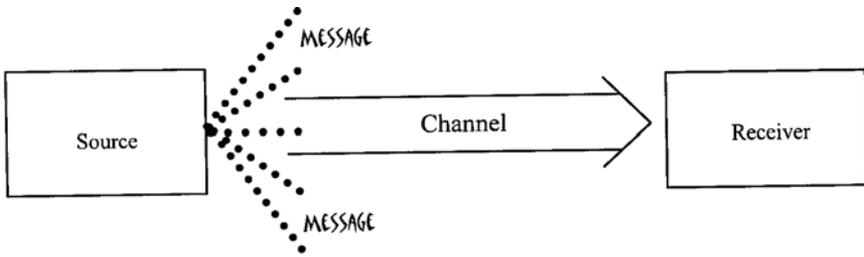


FIG. 4.1. A simplified model of communication. The linear model is useful for its portrayal of the basic elements in the communication process. Chapter 13 discusses important limitations of this model as a representation of the communication process.

Examine a simple model of the communication process and consider what elements we can control and what elements we cannot control. This varies with the context in which a manager works, but communication research has demonstrated that, overall, managers have the most control over the *source* and the least control over the *receiver*. With the use of paid advertising, the manager can control the source, the message, and the channel. Public relations messages, however, often must travel through *gatekeepers*, or people between the original source and the ultimate message recipient. These include editors, reporters, and opinion leaders, among others. As a result, you may have control over who your initial source will be, such as the CEO of a corporation, and you can agree with your source on a message, but you can lose control quickly as the message goes through gatekeepers and evolves. Your best hope for control, therefore, is to gain a thorough understanding of everything that might affect the dissemination, evolution, and interpretation of your key messages.

## THE BENEFITS OF RESEARCH

Research offers benefits that can help the strategic manager develop the understanding necessary to design and maintain successful communication programs. First, research can help the manager make sense of the increasing fragmentation of audiences in global, multimedia communication environments. Research can probe attitudes, identify opinion leaders, and help determine appropriate timing for actions and messages.

Second, research can help keep top-level management from losing touch with important stakeholders from which they may become insulated. According to the homophily principle (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981), people tend to exchange ideas most frequently among those who share similar characteristics, such as beliefs, values, education, and social status. Without extra effort, therefore, management can lose touch with nonmanagement employees, as well as with other stakeholders. *Homophily* refers to the degree

to which pairs of individuals who interact share similarities, which tend to help them understand each other and value each other's perspectives. Because effective public relations focuses on relationship building, it is important for stakeholders who depend on each other to understand and respect each other; two-way communication is essential for effective public relations. One survey found that 24% of unionized companies that used attitude surveys to gather information from employees suffered strikes, whereas 48% of those who had not done opinion research suffered strikes. Among all companies surveyed, 64% of those that suffered strikes had not performed survey research in the past year. Monsanto, for example, discovered through a benchmarking survey of employees that the employees were suffering from information overload. In response, the company consolidated 22 newsletters into one, and made more use of e-mail, less use of video and audio media, and more use of face-to-face communication. The company also adopted an open communication policy that fostered trust on the premise that trust increases productivity. The company found in a more recent survey that 80% of employees felt they were getting good information, exceeding the objective of at least 50%.

Third, research can help confirm whether complaints about an organization are widespread beliefs or represent the impressions of a vocal minority that holds little credibility with key stakeholders. It also can prevent organizations from wasting effort on nonexistent issues. For example, the American Dairy Association (ADA) knows from recent research that it does not need to do a multimillion dollar campaign to dissuade Americans from thinking cheese is an unsuitable lunch food because of its fat content. A survey of 1,002 respondents demonstrated that cheese already was the most common food chosen for lunch, that the top reason for choosing it was its taste, and that eating nutritiously was the second highest priority (after taking a break) at lunchtime (American Dairy Association, 1999). Because "low in fat" was one of the top two factors cited by respondents as making a meal nutritious, the ADA could safely conclude that fat in cheese was not preventing people from putting it into their lunch boxes. In fact, because no cheese-fat-lunch connection seemed to exist in public opinion, implementing a campaign acknowledging the connection could create a problem where none previously had existed.

Fourth, research can guide strategy so that funds and efforts are spent wisely. Research can reduce the cost of a campaign and, as a result, can enhance the credibility of the communication professionals with top management. An organization may find that a mass mailing, in addition to being expensive, is less effective than a few targeted, customized contacts. Editors commonly grouse that they receive many shotgun style news releases that go straight into the garbage because the releases do not show immediate relevance to their readers or viewers.

Fifth, research can help prevent unintended effects. A firm called Successful Marketing Strategies found out the hard way, when a "tease and

deliver” promotional strategy for a high-tech product backfired. The promotion for the product, which was designed to save data from accidental destruction, included a mailing to trade publication editors, in a plain brown envelope, which featured a note that read, “Who’s been shooting [name of publication] readers?” A decal of a bullet hole appeared on the outside of the envelope, which was hand addressed to 50 editors and reporters without any return address. A second mailing, 2 days later, was stamped “CASE FILE 7734” and had a card that read, “Who’s been shooting [name of publication] readers in the foot?” The answer, inside the fold-out card, was that they were shooting themselves in the foot by not having the product to protect their data. Had the firm done advance research of the target public, it would have learned that several editors had received bona fide threats in the past, which made them sensitive to this sort of mailing. Had the firm done pretesting, it might have caught the typo on the first mailing (leaving out “in the foot”) that increased the perception of real threat. It also might have discovered that editors receiving the anonymous mailing might call in the FBI or the Postal Service to investigate, which happened. Fortunately, the company managed to assuage the nerves of most editors through individual follow-up contacts and ended up with a lot of attention for the product. The firm learned, however, that public relations professionals need to consider the perspective of the people who will receive their messages to make sure messages will be received as intended. As Settles (1989) wrote, “Success in public relations comes from the ability to incorporate the lessons learned from past mistakes into bold future steps” (p. 39). To the extent the manager can make mistakes in the pretesting stage, fewer lessons will have to be learned the hard way.

Sixth, research can provide facts on which objectives for accountability can be based. Baseline data on consumer attitudes or behavior, for example, are necessary to demonstrate change after a campaign is finished. NewsEdge Corp. demonstrated that a campaign to address high employee turnover following a merger of three competing companies reduced turnover to 6% from 40%, earning the company a Platinum PR Honorable Mention from *PR News*.

## SPECIFIC RESEARCH FUNCTIONS

As a manager, you will consider three types of research in planning: formative research, program research, and summative (or evaluation) research. Formative research provides data and perspective to guide campaign creation. Program research guides the implementation of the program to ensure that strategies have the intended effects instead of unintended, counterproductive effects. Summative research provides data to evaluate the success of a communication program based on the achievement of stated objectives.

More specifically, research can help strategic planning in six key areas:

1. *Problem identification.* First, research can show whether a problem suspected to exist truly does exist. It also can help identify where the problem is, when the problem occurs, when it developed, or if it has not yet developed and could be prevented. For example, when Enron collapsed, other utility companies realized this could affect their own ability to survive. Kansas City–based Aquila therefore hired Edelman Public Relations to maintain its credibility with the public while it pursued a restructuring project. They identified two key target publics and developed messages appropriate for each. They emphasized the maintenance of open communication and balanced the current bad news with information about long-term strategies for recovery. They avoided a variety of disastrous outcomes, such as a widespread equity sell-off, and the stock price began to rise again from its low point in 2003. The chair of the company won reelection at the company’s annual meeting with 95% of the vote.

2. *Problem effects or implications.* Research can demonstrate how big a problem is, as well as for whom it poses difficulties. The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, for example, discovered that in 2000 only 34% of women knew that heart disease is the biggest killer of women, with eight times more women dying from heart disease than from breast cancer. This convinced them to target women with an awareness campaign that increased awareness by 12% in 1 year.

3. *Strategic direction.* Research can suggest ways to communicate effectively about a problem and actions to solve the problem. When Burson-Marsteller had 3 months to convince California voters to defeat Proposition 54, which would eliminate the collection of racial data by public agencies, they had to move quickly and find a way to compete with the main event scheduled for that particular election day: the recall vote on Governor Gray Davis. The agency quickly gathered existing information related to a previous, similar initiative to analyze voter demographics, attitudes, profiles, exit polls, and media coverage. They also monitored current media coverage and messages distributed by the opposition. They held focus groups with grassroots representatives and formed a steering committee to ensure support and tight organization for the campaign. They learned that constituents responded strongly to a message that asserted that the initiative was “bad medicine” because the lack of racial ethnic data would compromise health care, public safety, and education programs. With a \$200,000 budget, modest for a statewide political campaign, the drive convinced 64% of voters to oppose the proposition, when 3 months before only 29% had opposed it and 50% had supported it. One key to their success: 20% had been unaware of the measure, which meant the campaign could frame the issue as “bad medicine” before this target group formed other opinions that would have to be changed (Table 4.1).

**TABLE 4.1**  
How Opposition to California Proposition 54 Grew

	<i>July</i>	<i>August</i>	<i>September</i>	<i>October</i>	<i>Election Day</i>
Oppose	29	35	40	49	64
Support	50	46	40	35	36
Undecided	21	19	20	16	—

Note: Reprinted with permission from the Public Relations Society of America based on field polling data and information from the California Secretary of State's office (PRSA, 2005).

4. *Strategy testing.* Research methods as diverse as focus groups and surveys can be used to test creative strategies to make sure they work as anticipated. Some companies now monitor their reputation through the use of chat rooms, mail lists, and news groups. On behalf of Cingular Wireless, Ketchum Public Relations designed a campaign to encourage teens to avoid dangerous distractions (such as talking on their cell phone) while driving. They screened a video for 230 teens to ensure their receptiveness to the message, which needed to "be funny / make me laugh, be honest, be clear so I get the message, don't try too hard to be cool, say/show something important, do not talk down to me, and use people my own age in your communications." They also showed the video to their safety partners and to dozens of teachers. Once re-edited in response to the feedback from each group, the video and associated lesson materials received an enthusiastic response from teachers, with 99% saying they would use it again. By 2005, 12 states had distributed the program to all driver education teachers statewide, exceeding the originally stated objective of 5 states.

5. *Tracking during implementation.* For a communication program to have an effect, the message must be distributed and received. In addition, activities need to take place as planned, and few things happen exactly the way a manager intended. For example, the Washington State Department of Ecology and PRR, Inc., wanted to improve air quality by convincing drivers to avoid long periods of idling while dropping off or picking up children at school. They made sure that campaign materials actually reached faculty and staff at targeted schools on time, and then they verified that the material was received by parents by keeping track of pledge cards that parents returned. Along the way they discovered that they needed to hire temporary staff to help prepare materials after well-meaning sponsors missed their deadlines. They also discovered that they needed extra staff to help collect idling data in locations where volunteer data collectors (high school students) could not complete the task. If they had not tracked the process carefully, these unexpected crises could have ruined the campaign and made an evaluation impossible.

6. *Evaluation of results.* Research can provide accountability to help communication practitioners prove program impact by demonstrating program results that confirm success. In the Washington State Department of Ecology's "Dare to Care About the Air" campaign, they documented that idling times decreased by 112% during the implementation period, far exceeding the objective of 50%. They also documented a 66.8% participation rate, which exceeded the stated objective of 50%.

## ELEMENTS OF A RESEARCH PLAN

Research plans, like communication plans, are vital to the success of communication programs. Because they too are goal oriented, they help keep strategic planning on track, on time, and within budget. A research plan includes an explanation of research needs; research goals; research objectives; hypotheses or hunches; and research questions to guide data collection and analysis, help propose research strategies, and prompt a discussion of how the results will be used. Your organization may develop its own template for a research plan, but one model that includes all of the important elements appears in Table 4.2.

## DETERMINING RESEARCH NEEDS

To develop a research plan, you must determine your research needs. Your initial situation analysis can help you do this. What do you know about the problem, the situation, your opportunities, and your constraints? What do you need to know?

For everything you think you know, test whether you have evidence to confirm that your information is correct. You can use many types of evidence, ranging from experts' observations to survey or sales data. The more scientific your data, the more convincing it will be and the more it can be trusted. More specifically, you can consider the following as evidence:

1. Public relations principles, laws, and professional guidelines can provide guidance for procedural and ethical issues.
2. Communication and persuasion theories are scientifically tested ideas about how and why things happen the way they do. Theories do not provide hard and fast rules about how things work. The way social science works, a theory cannot be proven right; it only can be proven wrong.
3. Expert observations can provide some validation, particularly at the brainstorming stage, but they are not as unimpeachable as hard data from surveys, sales, spreadsheets, or experiments. Quotes from individuals with high credibility and relevance to the situation are most useful.

4. Quantitative data can include survey data, sales figures, content analysis, experimental results, budget histories, formal tracking data from websites, customer service calls, and so on.
5. Qualitative data can include focus groups, interviews, field observations, informal tracking communication among stakeholders, and so on. These also are most useful at the brainstorming stage.

You may find that some of your ideas about the problem are based on assumptions instead of hard evidence. If possible, test the veracity of these assumptions. For example, service organizations frequently assume

**TABLE 4.2**  
Elements of the Research Plan

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Title Page	Page
(Include client's name, agency name, date, and title)	
<b>I. Research Needs</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem statement</li> <li>• Situation analysis               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the issue (problem statement)</li> <li>– what was known about the client and the issue                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– history</li> <li>– reporting lines for budget and policies</li> <li>– internal and external opportunities and challenges</li> </ul> </li> <li>– assumptions (things we think we knew but have not verified)</li> <li>– information needs (questions)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<i>length: ranges considerably, often 2 to 8 pages</i>
<b>II. Research Goals (What are you trying to find out?)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal statements of research goals</li> <li>• Further explanation of each goal, as needed</li> </ul>	<i>length: usually 1 page or less</i>
<b>III. Research Objectives (How will you find out, and by when?)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal statements of objectives</li> </ul>	<i>length: usually 1 page or less</i>
<b>IV. Hypotheses (Hunches or evidence-based expectations)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anticipated answers to questions</li> <li>• Reasoning for answer anticipated</li> </ul>	<i>length: usually 1 to 2 pages</i>
<b>V. Research Strategies</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanation of proposed methodology, sampling approach               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– reasons for choices based on time, budget expertise, and need for precision</li> <li>– advantages and limitations of each choice against alternatives</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Operationalization of concepts (How will ideas be measured?)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– wording of questions</li> <li>– relevance of questions to hypotheses</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Procedures for data analysis</li> </ul>	<i>length: usually 2 to 4 pages</i>
<b>VI. Expected Uses of the Results</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What will be done with the information gained (Market segmentation, theme development, strategy development)</li> </ul>	<i>length: usually 1 page or less</i>

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that poor attendance, low subscriptions, or low registrations reflect a poor reputation that requires improvement. Upon further research, however, organizations may find that their problems stem from low awareness instead of from negative attitudes, requiring a communication program different from what a reputation management program would entail.

## DETERMINING AND UNDERSTANDING TARGET PUBLICS

You want to know as much as possible about target publics. First you need to identify and, perhaps, prioritize them. This process is called *segmentation*. Then you need to understand more deeply their interests, their needs, their concerns, their beliefs, and their behaviors.

Your *target publics* are subcategories of your *stakeholders*. Stakeholders are those who should care and be involved or those who can be affected by or who can affect your program. Because public relations focuses on the development and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships, ask yourself who benefits from your organization's activities, directly and indirectly, and on whom does your organization depend to achieve stated goals, both in the short term and in the long term. Who belongs in your problem statement? You can segment publics by various characteristics. These include the following:

1. *Demographics*. These include common census-type categories, such as age, gender, race or ethnicity, education level, occupation, family size, marital status, income, geographic location, political party, and religion.
2. *Psychographics*. These include personality and attitudinal characteristics, including values, beliefs, and lifestyle. These characteristics can help you identify who holds hopes, fears, and interests that most help or hinder your communication and organizational goals.
3. *Sociographics*. A wide variety of categories can be called sociographics, but they tend to focus on behaviors and characteristics common to an easily identified group of people. Broom and Dozier (1990) summarized several sociographic categories of value to communication professionals, including the following:
  - *Covert power*. This represents an attempt to discover who holds indirect power over persons who may more directly affect your program's success. For example, an administrative assistant holds a great deal of covert power over a busy executive who relies on the assistant to screen calls and help prioritize schedules. Family members also hold covert power over many business decisions and certainly over purchasing decisions. Marketers refer to the power of children in sales as the *nag factor*.
  - *Position*. This represents an attempt to identify occupations or leadership positions that make individuals important stakeholders

and depends greatly on the context in which you work. For example, lobbyists, journalists, legislators, union representatives, PTA officers, and teachers all can act as opinion leaders with wide-ranging effects in certain situations.

- *Reputation.* Sometimes people who influence others' opinions and behaviors cannot be categorized neatly into occupations or positions but can be identified by other stakeholders. For example, particular older peers may influence the extent to which younger schoolchildren embrace a recycling or health-promotion campaign. People in a community may identify individuals who have credibility over a zoning issue by virtue of their social ties or community activism.
  - *Organizational membership.* A special interest group will care who is a member and who is not. It is important to identify who is a member of competing or complementary organizations that can be of assistance to your program directly or indirectly. When the Seattle Sheraton wanted to gain the business of corporate executives, for example, it determined on which organizations the executives served as board members. Targeting its community service activities to these organizations helped the Sheraton cement ties with these important decision makers.
  - *Role in decision process.* Decisions often are made in incremental steps by a combination of individuals and committees. Gaining support at each step can require different strategies.
4. *Behaviors.* Purchasing patterns and attendance histories can provide useful information about who is using your organization's services, who might use them, who has rejected them, and so on.
  5. *Communication behaviors.* These include latent (inactive but relevant) and active publics. You need to determine levels of awareness and the extent to which individuals care or do not care about your organization and its activities. These characteristics are likely to affect how they react to information about your organization. Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggested three measures to determine activity:
    - *Problem recognition.* This represents the extent to which publics sense that a problem exists. If they see no problem, they will not be "active" or interested in the issue. Their level of recognition will affect the extent to which they seek to process information related to the issue.
    - *Constraint recognition.* This represents the degree to which individuals believe they have the ability to affect an issue or situation. They may see constraints, or impediments, that limit their ability to change a situation or participate in an activity. If they do not feel they can participate or make a difference, they will be less likely to make an effort to think extensively about the issue.

- *Level of involvement.* This represents the degree to which individuals feel a connection between a situation or issue and themselves. The more they believe an issue can affect them, the more likely they are to take an active interest. Less involved individuals take a more passive approach.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) proposed four types of publics: (a) those active on all relevant issues, (b) those apathetic on all relevant issues, (c) those active on issues only if they involve most people in a relevant population, and (d) those active only on a single issue. More recently (“Grunig’s Paradigm,” 1998), Grunig suggested that stakeholders can be divided into three segments, depending on their level of “excitement” or interest in an issue. The groups include

- *Long-haul types*, deeply interested in a topic and its ramifications
- *Special interest types*, concerned only about certain elements of a topic, such as how a newly proposed school building will affect their property taxes
- *Hot-button types*, interested only in elements that spark emotional debate, such as gun control

## DETERMINING PROGRAM OUTCOMES

You need to identify what your program outcomes will be, as well as whether you need to evaluate *intermediate outcomes* along with *ultimate outcomes*. Motivating some sort of behavioral outcome helps public relations demonstrate bottom-line value. Often, however, a number of intermediate steps are required before you can achieve that final outcome. For example, a campaign to promote donations for the hungry could find it difficult to gain people’s attention, particularly if the campaign takes place at a time other than the winter holiday season, when donation activity tends to be high. Holding a special event that attracts a potentially interested public could attract their attention while encouraging them to bring a donation (even a single can of food). Once present at the event, they can be encouraged to make additional donations or to become a member of the sponsoring organization. Attendance would be an intermediate behavior, can donations would be a second intermediate behavior, and memberships would be the ultimate behavior.

## TESTING COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

You need to know as much as possible about the potential channels of communication available for your public relations program. Some channels will be more expensive, or more time consuming, or more efficient, or

will reach different audiences. People who are more interested will go to more trouble to find out information about an issue, but an organization frequently must assume that target publics are not interested or at best are easily distracted by competing messages and priorities. This may vary depending on your market and the publics with whom you wish to communicate. The National Cancer Institute has developed a helpful chart of mass media channel characteristics that can serve as a general guide.

To choose effective communication vehicles, you need to assess the following:

1. *Credibility.* This refers to the extent to which the target publics trust the source of your messages, believe the source is unbiased, and believe the source is competent or expert in the topic under discussion.
2. *Reach and exposure frequency.* Is it easy for the target publics to gain access to information via this channel? How much exposure can you achieve?
3. *Efficiency.* You need to consider relative cost (in advertising called *cost per thousand*) against relative benefits. Costs include production and distribution costs in terms of monetary investments and time and staff requirements. To what extent can you reach target audiences versus other audiences less critical to your program?
4. *Control.* You need to determine to what extent the content and distribution of the message can be managed and to what extent control is important for the communication program. In crisis situations, companies often buy advertising to get their messages out without any filters. In other cases, a lack of control is preferred because of the increased credibility for a message that appears as editorial copy instead of as a purchased advertisement.
5. *Flexibility.* This refers to the extent to which the target publics can gain access to the message in a way convenient to them. The Internet, for example, provides users with the flexibility to review as much information as they wish whenever they wish, as opposed to having to wait to learn about a topic until the 11:00 news.
6. *Context.* This refers to the environment in which a message is presented, such as in the middle of a sports or entertainment program, during the news, or on the ceiling of a subway train.

You want to be able to predict how a message will be received by those you want to receive it. To do this you need to know how your target public feels about your organization and possible information sources and how their attitudes relate to specific message strategies you might employ. Keep in mind that you need to be able to anticipate the extent to which unintended recipients may have access to your message and how their reactions may affect your program goals.

You do not want to have to pull costly advertising, as did the Ad Council and Connect for Kids, a child advocacy initiative of the Benton Foundation, when humor in their ad campaign disparaged other child advocates. The copy in the ad called school board members “boogerheads,” attracting nationwide protests from school boards and superintendents for being disrespectful in a campaign that was intended to promote respect (“Humor Backfires,” 1999).

## TESTING THE MESSAGE

The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention developed a helpful guide for avoiding problems in message development (“Avoiding Common Errors,” 1990). They recommend checking to make sure messages are *clear, accurate, and relevant*. Clarity means checking whether the target public might interpret a message in a way other than, especially opposite to, what was intended. Mixed messages may appear to include contradictions. Pretesting can help the message designer avoid confusion.

Accuracy means making sure factual statements are correct and based on solid, verifiable evidence. Taking information out of context can change its meaning so that it no longer can be considered accurate. Unfortunately, many professed facts spread over the Internet without the benefit of fact checkers and editors, and they sometimes end up in print in credible media. Be careful to verify information independently such that the original source can be traced and checked. Second-hand information should not be considered real information. According to Kogan Page, Ltd., creators of a Corporate Communication Handbook (“Culling Lessons,” 1998), the lack of accurate information is one of the three most important characteristics of a crisis. Supplying accurate information, therefore, can be one of the most effective tools for defusing a crisis.

Relevance means making sure the intended receivers will pay attention to the message. Messages must appeal to their values and interests and communicate in a language they use and understand. Porter Novelli, for example, found that calling obesity a *disease* instead of a *condition* made overweight individuals more receptive to messages about an antiobesity drug. Attempts to use current slang and dialects can backfire and require careful pretesting.

## TESTING THE INFORMATION SOURCES

When testing a message, it is imperative to test the credibility of the source. Research can guide you as you consider who should serve as information sources for your communication program messages. Sources must be *credible, expert and relevant*, and—you hope—interesting. To the social

scientist, credibility includes various elements, but in general it simply means that people will find the source trustworthy. Public relations issues often boil down to a lack of trust. Expertise means the person seems knowledgeable about the topic. Relevant means that the target public will relate well to the person. Teenagers, for example, often would rather hear from another teenager than from an authority figure. In a crisis, even if the public relations officer is knowledgeable about company policies and plans, and even if the officer has a credible reputation among journalists, the most relevant source still is the CEO because the CEO is the person in charge.

One way of testing credibility is to have the moderator of a focus group, a semistructured group interview, ask what participants would think of a message if the sponsor were a commercial advertiser, or a religious organization of some type, or the government, or a local chamber of commerce. A clear, accurate, and relevant message from a source perceived as untruthful, biased, or incompetent can backfire. As chapter 15 explains, credibility is one of the most important requirements for effective communication and, when necessary, for persuasion.

## DEVELOPING A RESEARCH STRATEGY

A myriad of approaches are available for tackling a problem and developing a complete situation analysis. The approaches explained here each offer a slightly different emphasis; depending on the context, one or a combination of these techniques may be most appropriate.

It has been said that asking “Why is this happening?” five times in a series will reveal the cause of a problem, which initially may be obscured. This technique, called the *Five Whys*, is especially useful when a problem is difficult to understand or particularly unusual. For example, when a large piece of the Jefferson Monument in Washington, D.C., fell off, threatening the safety of visitors and creating a public relations worry, the Five Whys traced the problem as follows.

The observation was that acid rain appeared to be eroding the monument, causing it to crumble. This suggested that a shelter might need to be built to protect it, which would be an expensive and potentially unattractive solution. But why was the erosion also evident on the inside of the monument, where rain would not be a factor?

### Why 1

This erosion was traced to the strong soap used to clean the monument daily, combined with jet fumes from the nearby National Airport. Why was it necessary to do so much more cleaning than at other monuments in the area?

## Why 2

It was pigeon droppings that required the extra cleaning. Why were pigeon droppings such a problem at this location?

## Why 3

An infestation of spiders that pigeons find especially tasty had occurred. Why was there an infestation of spiders?

## Why 4

Spiders were finding a bounty of midge eggs to eat, which they loved. Why were there midge eggs?

## Why 5

Midges live in the reeds in the backwaters of the Potomac River, which runs near the monument. At sunset, they swim and mate and lay their eggs, but they can get distracted by bright lights, which they love.

The solution was to turn on the lights near the monument 1 hour later. It was inexpensive, effective, and not unattractive (Geistfeld, 1995).

Whatever strategy you use while researching an issue, this example nicely illustrates a tactic useful for delving into the heart of a problem. Some specific types of research strategies include the following:

1. *Communications audit.* According to Kendall (1996), an audit examines, describes, and evaluates the status of a designated program. A communications audit examines the vehicles through which messages are sent and received from stakeholders. The audit requires
  - Identifying the relevant internal and external publics
  - Collecting data from designated publics, using methods such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys to determine their use of communication vehicles, as well as their impression of the vehicles and of the organization
  - Analyzing current programs, personnel, and materials used for communication
  - Examining trends, opportunities, and challenges relevant to the organization.

The audit, which can focus on the communication department or on the organization as whole, culminates in recommendations for action. Just as financial audits occur regularly, communication audits also should take place on a regular basis. Because audits are broad

based they can help address specific problems but they can also help guide more global, long-term planning.

2. *Social responsibility audit*. This is a more specific form of the communications audit. Kendall (1996) recommended a social responsibility audit as an examination of an organization's performance related to corporate citizenship. As described by Kendall, the social responsibility audit focuses on factors that affect the organization, rather than on publics and communication activities. The social responsibility audit involves the following tasks:
  - Identifying issues that have social or civic implications
  - Ranking the issues based on when the issue will affect the organization, the extent to which its effects will be direct or indirect, and the significance of the issue to the organization
  - Examining which departments can affect or will be affected by the issues
  - Developing possible responses
3. *Reputation audit* ("Can Value," 1996). Reputation is so important that it may be helpful to quantify. A reputation audit can provide a situation analysis focused on reputation. The audit involves the following:
  - An identity analysis, which is essentially a communications audit
  - An image analysis, to determine how the organization is perceived by key constituencies via surveys
  - A coherence analysis, to compare the desired identity with the perceived identity
4. *Gap research*. Sometimes called *perception gap* or *need* research, the gap method uses a series of four questions to ask target publics to perform their own diagnosis of an organization's strengths and weaknesses ("Gap Research," 1994). The questions include the following:
  - On a scale (such as 1–9), how would you rate us on . . . ?
  - Why did you give that rating? (This could evolve into the Five Whys.)
  - Knowing the organization as you do, how good could we get if we really tried (on the same scale as used for question 1)?
  - What would we have to do to get there?The gap method is a way to perform focused brainstorming with a variety of stakeholders. Sometimes this makes a more sophisticated analysis unnecessary.
5. *Co-orientation research*. This is a perspective especially appropriate to public relations problems because of its focus on relationships. According to co-orientation theory, successful communication depends on accurate perceptions from all parties involved, with ultimate success defined as consensus (Fig. 4.2). In the case of a controversy, an organization can ask the following questions:
  - What does the organization think about X?
  - What does the organization think the public thinks about X?

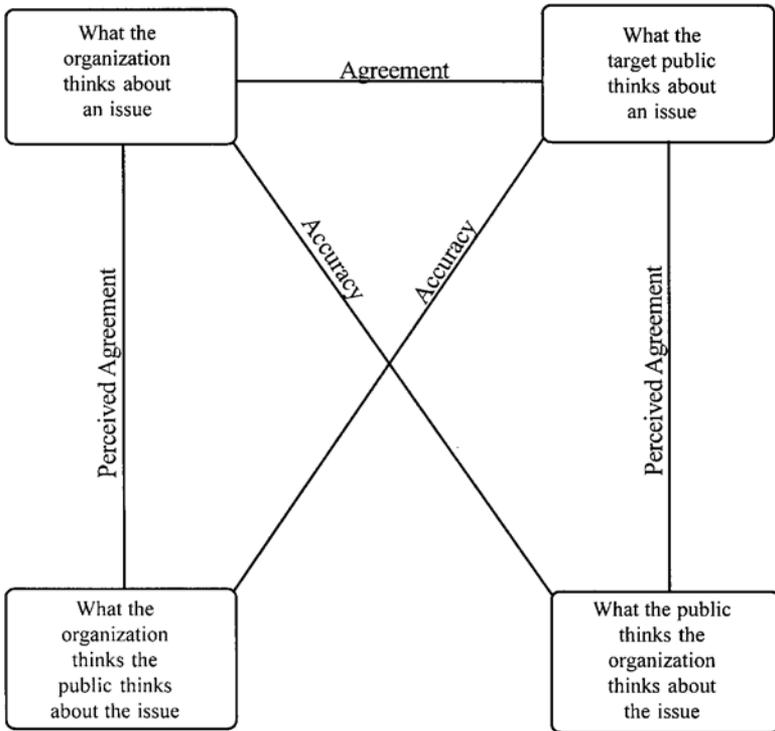


FIG. 4.2. The co-orientation model. The achievement of agreement, accuracy, and perceived agreement constitute *consensus*, which is the ideal outcome for public relations.

- What does the public think the organization thinks about X?
- What does the public think about X?

By asking these four questions, the communication manager can determine the extent to which the problem is one of true disagreement or one of perceived agreement or disagreement. Co-orientation, as a result, is a good way to diagnose the potential for miscommunication that can hurt attempts at building consensus and damage an organization's reputation. According to Broom and Dozier (1990), the most common public relations audit involves establishing an organization's view on an issue, determining the target public's view on the issue, and determining the distance between the two views. This type of audit, however, does not account for the extent to which these views may be based on misperceptions of the other party's views or intentions. The co-orientation model accounts for both actual disagreement and perceived disagreement, which makes it a more powerful strategic planning tool. Co-orientation analysis determines actual agreement, perceived agreement, and accuracy. True consensus cannot occur until both parties agree and know they agree.

## DEVELOPING A REALISTIC RESEARCH PROPOSAL

It may appear that an organization can perform unlimited types of research endlessly. Clearly, organizations cannot afford the time and expense involved. As a result, the development of a research plan also requires an examination of constraints and priorities that can guide the type and extent of research pursued. The manager needs to prioritize research needs and appropriate research methods because the ideal research will never take place. Some mysteries will remain unsolved, and good research often raises additional, new questions (recall the Five Whys). The manager can rely on four issues to develop realistic parameters for the research plan:

1. *Time.* When are the results needed to develop the final communication plan by the required deadline? If the organization faces an immediate crisis, lengthy research cannot occur. If the organization's focus turns to long-term planning, more time can be devoted to research.

2. *Budget.* How much money and staff time can be devoted to research? Some types of research, such as face-to-face surveys, are expensive. You do not want to spend too much of your program budget on research and have too little left for implementation of the campaign itself. As a result, Broom and Dozier (1990) and Ketchum ("Bottom-Line," 1999) both have offered a guideline for research spending, suggesting that 8% to 10% of a total program budget should be used for research. Data collected from 1,026 public relations clients in the 12th annual Thomas L. Harris/Impulse Research Public Relations Client Survey (Thomas L. Harris and Impulse Research, 2004) suggested that in reality only about 3% of communication budgets go toward research, down from 5% in 2001. Most of that research focuses on media exposure and corporate reputation, rather than on more sophisticated, outcome-oriented research. It can help to bundle relevant research costs in with the cost of a product such as the production of a video.

3. *Levels of expertise available.* Consider who will collect the data and how knowledgeable they are about data collection and analysis procedures. If data collection cannot be farmed out to an independent research firm, make sure the project does not require specialized expertise. As chapters 6, 11, and 12 discuss, a variety of details related to sampling, question design, and analysis can affect the veracity and credibility of research results. Do only what can be done well.

4. *Need for precision and depth (how research will be used).* Sometimes sophisticated research is overkill, but other times more refined information is required. For example, an election on a controversial issue can hinge on the details. Be ready to explain how research will be applied to strategic development and why the level of research proposed is necessary for program success. Public relations managers surveyed in 1996 (Pinkleton et al., 1999) commonly reported that clients wanted research but did not

want to pay for it. Research does not necessarily have to cost a lot, but the program manager needs to provide convincing reasons for performing desired research that will require an investment of resources such as time or money. This is where it is helpful to include hypotheses, or hunches, regarding what results you expect to find. The ability to explain how the results will direct strategy and how they will affect the likely outcome of the program can help convince the recalcitrant client.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

A carefully conceived research plan will lay a strong foundation for program planning. Clear research goals and well-considered research strategies that correspond to the needs and constraints of the situation at hand give the manager the best chance of success in the later stages of program planning. The following chapters provide more background on the strengths and weaknesses of various research methods and sampling techniques. Managers can refer to these as they consider how to make choices that will not cost too much or take too long to implement but that will guide the effective selection of target publics, program outcomes, communication channels, and message strategies.

# II

## GATHERING USEFUL DATA FOR STRATEGIC GUIDANCE

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# 5

## Research Decisions and Data Collection

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### Chapter Contents

- Applications of Research
  - Before Starting the Research Process
  - Formal and Informal Approaches to Public Relations Research
  - Informal Research Concerns
  - Research Issues to Consider
  - Steps to Research Project Design
  - Final Thoughts
- 

Traditionally, public relations practitioners have relied on strong media relations skills and key media placements to succeed in public relations. Practitioners, executives, and clients generally bought into the myth that public relations works with nuances of public opinion and other intangibles that simply cannot be measured (Cutlip et al., 2006). Public relations campaigns were based on practitioner hunches, knowledge of the market, and simple common sense. Practitioners used savvy media relations skills and well-honed campaign tactics to generate media attention for publicity-seeking organizations and relied on thick binders filled with clippings of their media placements to demonstrate the value of public relations to organizations.

Although many practitioners continue to operate this way—a recent survey indicated that more than 80% of practitioners still use clip-based counts to measure the outcomes of their campaigns (“2005 Challenge,” 2005)—several organizational and environmental changes have made this model of public relations nearly obsolete as a credible practice.

Fewer financial resources, increasingly competitive markets, and increasing costs, in particular, have resulted in greater organizational attention to public relations programs and a greater demand for evidence-based validation that public relations programs are effective. The result is that practitioners who enjoyed past success based solely on their practical understanding of local media markets, a well-developed network of contacts, and strong media relations skills increasingly find themselves struggling to gain organizational resources and maintain organizational support in an era of greater program accountability (Pinkleton et al., 1999; "What Trends," 1997).

Even though practitioners' reliance on research has increased, not every successful campaign requires original research. Often, research requires a substantial investment of resources, and many organizations prefer to plan and evaluate campaigns based on their existing understanding of markets and their assessments of key audience responses. Some situations may require only the tracking of public responses to media placements, for example, or votes on political initiatives. In addition, some public relations efforts are so limited in scope that they simply do not require or receive the resources necessary to conduct even small-scale research. In these situations, both practitioners and the organizations with which they are working may be satisfied with subjective interpretations and the outcomes that, on their face, appear to result from public relations programs.

Unfortunately, practitioners who make campaign recommendations without research typically are limited to arguing that, perhaps based on their years in the business, they know a situation and can recommend a solution. With no concrete evidence to support these claims, they have little basis for organizational support of such recommendations, and others with different backgrounds or similar levels of experience commonly recommend different options. Research reveals the perceptions, interests, and opinions of targeted audiences; produces evidence used to select from among competing solutions; and provides a benchmark from which to evaluate campaign success. Research also allows campaign planning and evaluation based on facts rather than on intuition, rule of thumb, or past practices. Practitioners find research particularly useful as the costs and importance of a campaign increase or as the certainty concerning an issue or public decreases.

In practice, each research setting is unique, and research decisions often are affected by several constraints, the greatest of which typically are time and budgetary limitations. The result is that no single "best" research method exists. Instead, the best research method is the one that most completely meets managers' information needs within the constraints of a given project. Given the often confusing decisions that concern research projects, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the practical issues that practitioners should consider before they make final decisions concerning a

research project. These issues include questions asked and answered before starting a research project; various constraints that affect research method choices; an overview of formal and informal research techniques; the steps taken in a typical research-planning process; and some issues to consider when dealing with research firms, in-house departments, or consultants.

### APPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

Managers use research throughout the campaign planning, implementation, and evaluation phases, as shown in Figure 5.1. The ways public relations professionals use research, however, change as the program evolves and typically depend on a manager’s communication needs. Practitioners may use precampaign, or formative, surveys, for example, to better

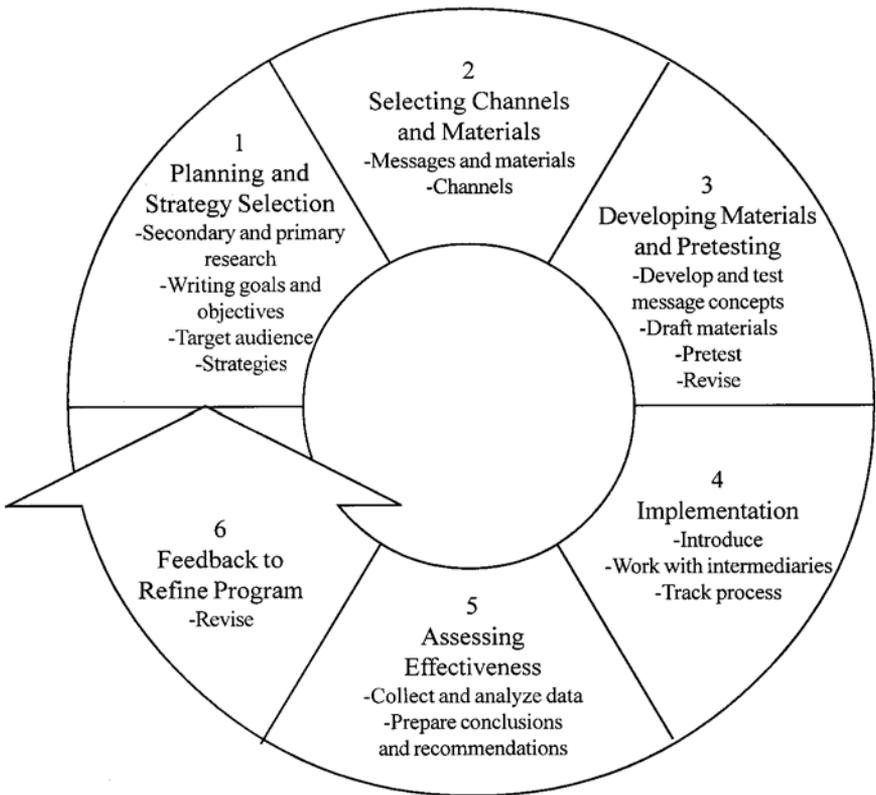


FIG. 5.1. Stages of communication. Strategic planning of communication programs is an ongoing process in which previous experience informs the planning of new programs and the refinement of old programs. Developed by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention for the planning of alcohol and other drug communication programs.

understand and help segment audiences. Similarly, campaign managers may employ focus groups to help them explore changes in people's opinions regarding a key issue or to help them refine message strategies as part of the campaign-monitoring process.

Campaign planners often use research to provide initial benchmarks against which they can measure postcampaign accomplishments. Initially, practitioners may rely on survey research to provide measurements of the awareness, attitudes, and behaviors of targeted audiences. Once practitioners have concluded a campaign, they commonly conduct additional research and compare their postcampaign results with their precampaign findings. In many cases, postcampaign research really is between-campaign research because practitioners use it as a platform from which to begin another campaign. In an ideal world, public relations professionals' use of research results in fact-based evidence of a campaign's accomplishments (or failures) and may serve as the basis for requesting additional organizational resources or creating new campaign initiatives.

This use of research to measure campaign effectiveness following a communication program helps practitioners achieve credibility with organizational management. Organizations are looking for a concrete return on what they perceive as an investment of limited resources in public relations. In today's highly competitive organizational environments, practitioner intuition and past experience rarely provide an acceptable basis from which to plan a communications campaign. Practitioner voices are drowned out by competing voices in an organization when their experience and intuition are pitted against quantitative research data. Managers who have access to such data have a strong credibility advantage over their intuition-reliant peers when it comes to influencing organizational decision making, developing communication strategies, and receiving organizational resources.

Practitioners also can use research to help management monitor changes in internal or external environments. It is too easy for organizational managers to become insulated from key publics in their busy and often-chaotic world. The rigorous demands of their schedule often leave decision makers unaware of the critically important attitudes and opinions of consumers, community members, employees, government leaders, and other key groups. In this case, public relations research can be used as what Peter Drucker called an organizational "hearing aid" ("Reflections," 1998) to keep management in touch with the attitudes and opinions of those individuals on which organizational success or failure depends.

Organizational managers also may use research to keep in touch with their competition. The current public relations environment is extremely competitive. An increasing number of organizations are battling for access to limited media space and the fragmented attention of target audience members. Savvy public relations practitioners and their clients make it

a priority to understand the strategies and tactics of their competition, to increase their own chances for success. Research can provide insight into various interest areas, such as an analysis of the features and appeals used by competitors in their messages and of audience responses to those messages.

Finally, practitioners can use research to generate publicity for organizations and clients. In most cases, organizations produce legitimate research with newsworthy results that benefit the sponsor of a project. In other cases, however, organizations manipulate participants' responses and purposefully misinterpret research results to attract as much media attention as possible. The result is that the media, and ultimately the public, may be misled by unscrupulous research firms or practitioners who engage in unethical practices in an attempt to make a media splash. Serious research scientists and public relations practitioners must use care when conducting research for publicity purposes. Journalists increasingly are skeptical about projects sponsored by organizations with a vested interest in the results. Despite these concerns, the potential uses of research in public relations are nearly endless; practitioners can rely on research results to inform nearly every aspect of the public relations process.

### BEFORE STARTING THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Before starting a research project, campaign planners must consider some basic issues that often are important to the successful completion of a project. Initially, it is important to determine what you want to know from the project with as much specificity as possible. Even exploratory projects need to have a clear purpose. Although this may appear obvious, relatively few research projects start with well-defined objectives. Instead, project managers commonly have such a vague sense of purpose that it is nearly useless. Organizations that want to use research to "better understand the market" or "see what people think of us" probably are wasting their time and money. Keep in mind that research projects are an expensive investment that are intended to provide an anticipated return. The company that engages in a poorly conceived research project and receives a relatively small benefit as a result will pay just as much for its research as the company that uses a well-designed project with specific objectives and benefits accordingly. Although determining informational needs and project objectives can be time consuming and challenging, it is the first important step in the successful completion of a research project and helps provide the best return on an organizational investment.

Practitioners need to ask several questions when considering a new research project, as shown in Figure 5.2. The first is, "What do we already know about the subject of our research?" Answering this question is intended to help narrow the scope and focus of a project. Once a project is

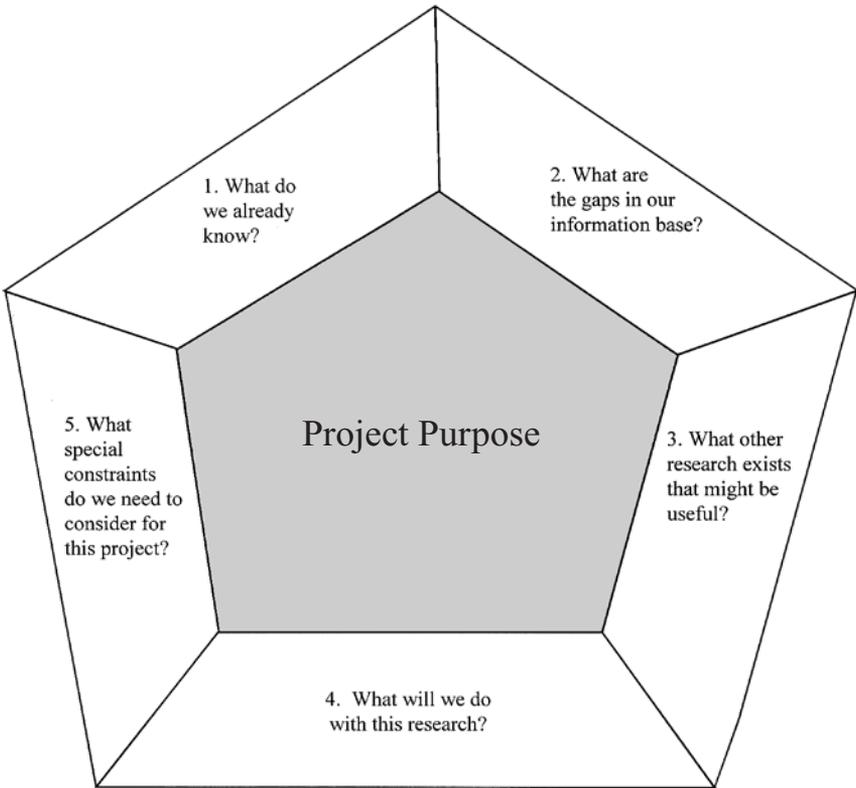


FIG. 5.2. Guiding questions for research decisions. When considering a research project, managers should ask these five questions. All decision making should focus on the purpose of the project to prevent unnecessary or useless research.

started, several potential topics and questions typically compete for limited project resources. Unfortunately, research managers typically eliminate a number of potentially important questions and even whole topics as time and budgetary realities force unrealistic expectations into real-world constraints. When research managers must make difficult decisions about what to keep and what to discard in a research project, it is critical that they have an understanding of their current knowledge base.

The next question is, "What are the gaps in our information base?" Although it seems obvious, the answer to this question provides concrete direction to organizational managers as they consider research topics and potential methods. Managers need to avoid approaching a research project as a single study and instead approach a project as part of an ongoing program of research concerning a topic. In reality, no single project can answer all the questions managers have concerning a topic, particularly given

the increasingly complex and competitive environment in which many organizations exist. In fact, research studies often raise new questions. When practitioners view single studies as part of a larger, ongoing program of organizational research, the result is more likely to provide a valuable contribution to an organization's base of knowledge concerning key audiences and issues.

The third question project managers must ask is, "What other research currently exists that might be useful?" An organization typically has an array of research available that it can use to inform its decision-making processes. Various syndicated research exists, for example, that provides useful information about target audiences' product and service usage, lifestyle, media usage, and other important characteristics. Similarly, Census Bureau data are available from a university library, and this high-quality, detailed information may be quite useful for organizations. Professional associations often conduct research that benefits association members. This research, although fairly broad in scope, can provide useful background information from which to begin a new project. Additionally, trade or academic publications often report research results concerning topics of potential interest to practitioners.

Researchers also may be able to reuse previously collected data as part of a new research project. This practice, called *secondary data analysis*, essentially is data recycling. It occurs when researchers use a set of data for a purpose different from its original use. Once researchers collect and analyze a data set, they often catalog it and set it aside. In other instances, educational institutions, foundations, and other organizations conduct large, multipurpose surveys and release the results to the public. In either case, practitioners may re-analyze these data for their own purposes if the data are available for use. If an organization is interested in interpreting changes in public opinion during an election year, for example, it may gain access to polling data during or after an election. In this case, the organization is bound by the methods and questions researchers used in the original study; however, the data still may be useful, and they may cost little or nothing to access. Any of these resources, and various additional ones, may provide information that has a significant bearing on a research project in the planning stages.

The fourth question project managers should ask is, "What will we do with this research?" Practitioners often initiate research projects as part of a problem-solving process. Research is most useful in this process when managers know how they will use the results as part of the problem-solving process. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for organizations to complete major studies and, after a short time, set the results aside and never look at them again. In reality, conducting a study does nothing for an organization by itself. Research findings only are useful when skillful managers use them as part of the planning and problem-solving process.

The fifth question managers need to ask is, “What special constraints do we need to consider for this project?” As discussed in chapter 4, project decisions depend on the time available to conduct the research, budgetary limitations, the expertise available to conduct the research, and the extent to which managers require precision and depth from a research project. In addition, some special situations can arise that make it advisable to consult a research specialist. Practitioners may have trouble collecting information about specific issues, for example, and may have trouble collecting information from hard-to-reach audiences. In some instances, people may be unwilling to discuss their private behavior with intrusive researchers. In other cases, practitioners may find it too difficult to locate sample members. How do you find a random sample of pregnant women, for example, and is such a sample really necessary for the successful completion of a research project? What if you want to survey urban residents, 25 to 34 years old, who use public transportation? In each of these cases, experts typically can develop customized research methods and sample selection strategies to provide practitioners with information concerning specific issues and hard-to-reach populations. Practitioners spend their money wisely when they use knowledgeable professionals who have access to relevant information and appropriate facilities to help them solve difficult data-collection issues.

By answering these questions, practitioners will gain a better understanding of the purpose of a research project and the conditions that must be met to make it a success. They also will be able to use research results to give a project the direction necessary to make it a worthwhile investment with an anticipated and valuable return.

### FORMAL AND INFORMAL APPROACHES TO PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH

At its most basic level, research simply is collecting information, and practitioners can use any number of methods to gather information, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. The most basic designation researchers typically make concerning research methods is formal versus informal—researchers also call these *casual*—approaches to data collection. Rather than fitting neatly into one of these categories, however, research methods generally fit along a continuum. As Figure 5.3 shows, the continuum ranges from nonscientific, casual research methods on one end to fully formal, scientific research methods on the other end. Just because a research method is casual does not mean it has no benefit or practical application. Instead, casual research methods simply fail to meet the standards required of formal, scientific research.

A quick look at some informal research methods makes it clear why researchers consider them nonscientific. One of the most common forms

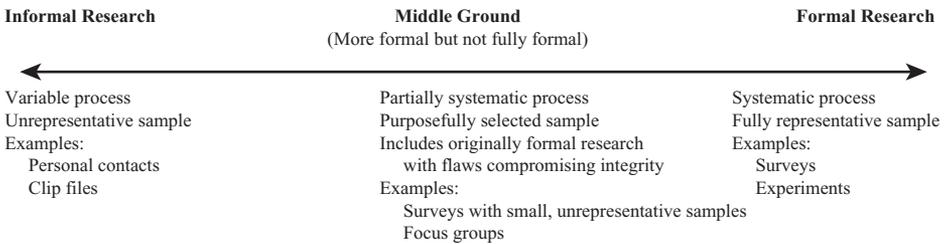


FIG. 5.3. The range of research methods. Research methods fall along a continuum ranging from casual and informal to systematic and formal.

of public relations research, for example, involves practitioners’ use of clip files to monitor newspaper and magazine coverage of an organization or issue. A clip file simply is a collection of news stories about an organization, and clipping services can provide practitioners with both print and broadcast clips. A practitioner using a clip file can examine the messages targeted audiences receive, gain a rudimentary understanding of public opinion concerning an organization or issue, and even determine the need for potential responses to media coverage, if necessary.

A network of personal contacts is another common form of casual research. When practitioners want to know how members of a targeted audience might respond to an issue or event, for example, they may simply call several acquaintances who generally fit the audience description and ask them for their opinions. Practitioners can use such information as the basis for organizational decision making, even though it is not scientific. Other types of casual research include analyses of letters or e-mail messages organizations receive or a even a consideration of field reports from organizational sources such as salespeople or recruiters. In each instance, information collected by these methods may provide an organization with information from which to make decisions about key issues or events, so what is it about this information that makes it casual and nonscientific?

For one thing, the informal research methods typically rely on information gathered from a sample that is not representative. When researchers collect data, they normally collect information from a sample, or subset, of the population. When a sample is representative, it has the same distribution of characteristics as the population from which it is drawn. Because of this, the opinions collected from a representative sample generally represent the opinions or behaviors that exist in a population. Thus, a sample of registered voters in Michigan, for example, theoretically represents the attitudes and behaviors of all registered voters in the state. Although researchers never draw a perfectly representative sample, some samples—based on probability sampling methods (discussed in chapter 6)—have a greater likelihood of being representative than other samples. When

practitioners contact just a few people to ask their opinions, participant's opinions are unlikely to represent the range of opinions that exist in a target audience consisting of thousands or even millions of people. When practitioners use informal research methods, they typically collect information from a sample that is not representative.

A second characteristic of informal research methods is that practitioners collect information in a manner that lacks a systematic process. When practitioners contact personal acquaintances to ask their opinions, for example, they are unlikely to use a standard set of questions with pre-determined response categories for each person. Such a process would defeat the purpose of the research by not allowing practitioners to take advantage of the different areas of expertise and experience of each of their contacts. As a result, this research does not benefit from a formal process or set of procedures that practitioners can use to collect information in a precise, reliable manner.

As an additional note, practitioners cannot accurately know or understand public opinion based solely on media portrayals. This practice fails the test of formal research because it is not based on a scientific test of the nature of the relationships among media coverage and the attitudes and opinions of target audience members. There are times, for example, when information and portrayals in the media have an obvious and direct effect on public attitudes or behavior. Tickle-Me Elmo, for example, was launched as a 1996 Christmas-season sellout because the toy appeared on the *Rosie O'Donnell* and *Today* shows, arranged by a public relations agency for the toy's manufacturer, Tyco. In this instance, Tyco's managers actually canceled advertising for the toy as stores ran out of the product and skirmishes broke out between parents trying to get their hands on this must-have toy (Fitzgerald, 1996). In other instances, however, media portrayals have little or no effect on attitudes or behavior. In fact, the media are full of persuasive messages warning people not to do some things and encouraging them to do other things. Although some people heed these messages, many others simply ignore them. As these examples show, practitioners' observations and assumptions about public opinion based on media placements are risky and necessarily informal.

In the middle of the casual-formal research continuum are various methods that typically require a more formal process than purely casual methods but still do not fulfill the requirements of formal, scientific research. The most commonly used research method in this category is focus grouping. A focus group is a directed group discussion typically consisting of 6 to 12 people. Participants usually share similarities with respect to key characteristics such as age, gender, product brand usage, political party affiliation, or any other characteristics deemed important by a project's sponsor. The discussion is led by a moderator who asks questions and probes participants' responses. The process is recorded and transcribed,

and research professionals and their clients attempt to gain key insights and draw meaning out of the participants' comments.

Even after all this effort, researchers still understand that focus group research is not formal research because of the size of the sample and the lack of systematic research procedures. A study must have an appropriate sample size (discussed in chapter 6) to qualify as formal research. Even the largest focus group normally is too small to meet the sample size required of formal research. In addition, under the best circumstances, scientific research follows a formal set of procedures that researchers apply equally to everyone in a study. When researchers conduct focus groups they typically do not apply the same procedures equally to every participant. In some cases, for example, a moderator may wish to ask certain participants follow-up questions based on their initial question responses, which is a strength of focus groups. Other participants may be reluctant to speak up or may hesitate to express their true opinions. In these situations, focus groups do not follow a standard procedure closely enough to qualify as formal, scientific research.

Other research methods that fall between formal and informal research include surveys that suffer from methodological limitations such as the use of nonrandom sampling methods. When mall intercept surveys are conducted, for example, members of an interview team typically position themselves at key locations throughout a mall and interview willing shoppers. The shoppers who participate in the survey make up what is called a *convenience* or *incidental* sample because survey team members select them solely on the basis of accessibility. Convenience sampling, however, is a nonprobability, nonrandom sampling method. Even though standing in a mall and talking to shoppers as they happen by appears to rely on a random-selection process, this sampling procedure falls short of the requirements of probability sampling. When researchers use truly random sampling methods, every person in a population has an equal chance of being included in the sample. In a mall intercept, even when researchers use a carefully constructed questionnaire that contains specific response categories, the sampling procedures still render the project's results potentially unrepresentative because they are not random. This leaves the project short of the standards necessary to qualify as formal, scientific research.

### INFORMAL RESEARCH CONCERNS

When researchers label a method *casual* or *informal*, it does not mean that the method is without benefit. In reality, practitioners use informal research methods on a regular basis and successfully apply their findings to many different public relations problems. It is important to note, however, that managers' use of such research comes with risk. Practitioners who use focus groups, for example, must be careful in their interpretation and

application of study results. It is easy to misinterpret focus group results because no matter how many focus groups researchers conduct, the results potentially suffer from significant flaws. Because focus group results provide no numerical measurement, for example, researchers may find it difficult to understand and interpret participants' ideas and comments. Ultimately, two practitioners who view the same focus group may interpret the results very differently, and it is quite possible that both interpretations may be incorrect.

More importantly, the results of focus groups and other informal research methods have little generalizability, or projectability. As already noted, researchers typically collect information from a sample of population members rather than from all population members. When researchers use formal research methods, they typically select a sample using probability sampling methods. Probability sampling methods have a greater likelihood of accurately reflecting the wide variety of attitudes and behaviors that exist in most populations because each member of the population has an equal chance of being included in the sample. The result is that practitioners can generalize or project research results from a probability-based sample to all members of a population with relative confidence. Practitioners have no basis for such projection when they use informal research methods because the sample typically does not accurately represent the population from which it was drawn. When researchers use informal research methods, they have no scientific basis for projecting research results from a sample to a population because not everyone in the population is represented in the sample.

Other problems with nonscientific research methods involve selective observations and ego involvement, both of which contribute to research results that are subjective instead of objective (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). When research findings are objective, they unbiasedly reflect the attitudes and behaviors of study participants, regardless of the personal views of researchers or project sponsors. Nevertheless, selective observation may occur when researchers purposefully interpret focus group results so that they match the ego needs of a client. When this happens, research results are worse than meaningless; they are wrong. These results will misdirect the decisions of organizational managers who are counting on accurate research to inform their decision-making process. Both formal and informal research methods can suffer from selective observations and the ego involvement of researchers, but these concerns are greater when researchers use informal research methods rather than formal research methods.

The potential problems with informal research were exemplified by the experiences of Milwaukee-based Marquette University when it decided to change the name of its sports teams to the "Gold" based in part on the results of focus groups. The university had nicknamed its teams the Warriors from 1954 until 1994. In 1994, Marquette dropped the name in response to

concerns that it was offensive to American Indians and adopted the name Golden Eagles. Additional research conducted later by the university revealed that its fans generally were unenthusiastic about the new nickname, and the issue built to a climax in May 2004 when a member of its board of trustees offered the university a \$1 million gift, which would be matched by another anonymous trustee, if it would return to its Warriors nickname ([milwaukee.bizjournals.com](http://milwaukee.bizjournals.com)). Although university administrators refused to return to the Warriors nickname, they eventually settled on the Gold as a new moniker, a name that originally emerged in some focus groups conducted by the university in 1993 (Seigel & Norris, 2005). Unfortunately, students, alumni, and news media responded quite negatively to the name, resulting in campus protests and an avalanche of unwanted media attention. Marquette recently returned to its Golden Eagles nickname, based on the results of a voting process that included students, alumni, and faculty and staff.

Why did a relatively simple decision result in so much rancor when Marquette administrators followed a process that has become fairly standard among organizations? There likely is more than one reason but it is apparent that the conclusions of the focus group did not accurately reflect the opinions of university stakeholders. Although focus group participants apparently liked the Gold as a nickname, the results of the research lacked external validity or projectability from the research sample to the larger population of university publics. This situation points out the problems practitioners face when they rely on informal research. Informal research findings misled university administrators and, as a result, they made an unpopular decision.

When conducted properly, however, scientific research methods are more likely to result in accurate observations that are high in projectability by following a formal process and well-conceived research design to its logical conclusion. As Nachmias and Nachmias (1981) noted, scientific research methods differ from other methods of acquiring knowledge based on their assumptions. At a philosophical level, the assumptions of science include, for example, that nature is orderly and regular, that it is possible to know nature, that nothing is self-evident, and that knowledge is derived from experience. At an applied level, scientific research methods are built on a system of explicit rules and procedures that, when correctly applied, have a high likelihood of producing accurate, reliable results. These research methods are by no means perfect, and social scientists regularly work to develop new research methods and to improve existing ones. The result is that formal research methodology has slowly grown in sophistication, as scientists exchange ideas and information.

The scientific research methods available to practitioners include experiments, content analyses, and surveys, which are perhaps the most common type of formal research practitioners use (2005 Challenge, 2005). In

addition, practitioners may use a variety of public and private databases and syndicated research resources that rely on scientific research methods. Newcomers to research methods should not be intimidated by the lofty goals and sometimes confusing terminology used in scientific research. Just as math expertise is not required to use a calculator, a scientific background is not required to understand formal research methods. Instead, practitioners should learn the strengths, weaknesses, and assumptions of each research method so that they clearly understand the advantages and limitations of the information they are using for strategic planning and evaluation. Research methods appropriate for some projects may be inappropriate for other projects. Substantial risks are associated with the misuse of research methods that provide unreliable or misleading information, which may result in negative consequences for organizations.

### RESEARCH ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Any time researchers collect information, they must consider several issues that affect the quality of the information they collect because they directly affect the degree to which research results can achieve representativeness and objectivity. In some cases, strategic planners should not trust research results as the basis for major decisions because they contain limitations and weaknesses. In other cases, researchers understand potential problems and can negate them through the use of selected research and sampling methods. Ideally, practitioners' trust in research results is appropriate to the level of accuracy, precision, reliability, and validity of a research method and the results it produces (Baxter & Babbie, 2004).

The first of these areas, *accuracy*, concerns whether a research method produces error-free data. Although practitioners may establish a minimum degree of accuracy for every research method, they do not always require highly accurate research results in applied research settings. In some cases, a general understanding of the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of targeted audience members is enough, and a research method that provides that kind of information, such as a focus group, is appropriate. When managers demand a high degree of accuracy, however, they use scientific research methods and probability sampling methods to provide relatively error-free results. In fact, when researchers use probability sampling procedures in survey research, they can calculate the range of error for participants' responses. Although no study is without some degree of error, when researchers use scientific methods, rely on an appropriate formula to calculate sample size, and use probability-based sampling methods, they are able to evaluate the accuracy of research results with relative confidence.

Research managers also must consider the *precision* of research findings that result from the use of different research methods. When research

findings are precise, they are exact. Consider the difference between asking a friend what the weather is like outside and using a thermometer to determine the temperature. In the first instance, our friend may say it is “warm” or “hot” outside. In the second instance, a thermometer may indicate it is 98°F. Both answers are informative and useful; however, one answer is more precise than the other. Although researchers generally desire precise research findings over imprecise research findings, not all research methods produce results with the same degree of precision, and at times precision may be less important especially if it comes with a high cost. Some research methods produce results that generally lack precision. Because focus groups are essentially a group discussion, for example, it is nearly impossible to measure results exactly within the context of the discussion.

A focus group may provide impressions, ideas, or general group agreement or disagreement, but these results will be broad and interpretive to an extent. When practitioners require precision, they will more likely turn to a survey questionnaire that contains specific questions and numerical response categories to record the attitudes and opinions of respondents. This is not to suggest, however, that practitioners find focus groups or other less precise research methods useless. When researchers are exploring people’s attitudes and opinions, for example, a highly precise questionnaire is likely to hurt their ability to gather useful information. At this point in the research process, practitioners typically are more interested in exploring people’s attitudes and opinions rather than in precisely measuring them. As an additional note, do not confuse precision with accuracy. It may be more precise to learn it is 98°F outside rather than it is “hot,” but both answers are wrong if it is snowing.

Research methods that produce accurate and precise results also should produce reliable results. Strictly speaking, *reliability* is repeatability. If researchers make repeated measurements of sample members’ attitudes, opinions, or behaviors, the results should be similar each time. When researchers use informal research methods, a lack of reliability often arises as a concern. If you call some of your friends to solicit their advice on an issue, the results are likely to vary considerably depending on whom you contact. This means the research method is not reliable. The same reliability concerns are true of informal research methods including mall intercepts and focus groups. When research managers use scientific research methods to collect data, however, the results generally are highly reliable. As an additional note, research methods that are reliable are not necessarily accurate. A scale that consistently weighs people 5 lb lighter than their actual weight—we all should have such a scale—is high in reliability but not accuracy (Baxter & Babbie, 2004).

Finally, practitioners must consider the *validity* of results produced using various research methods. At a basic level, valid research results are legitimate or genuine. An IQ test is a valid measure of intelligence, for example,

if it genuinely measures the intellectual abilities of the individual taking the test. Social scientists have divided *validity* into numerous components in an attempt to reflect all of the nuances of the term and their implications for data collection. Although it is important for research professionals to understand validity concerns in all of their manifestations (and readers can learn more in any good research methods textbook), we purposefully simplify this discussion to selectively consider applied aspects of validity in keeping with the purposes of this text and the patience of our readers. Kerlinger (1973) suggested two broad categories of validity: external and internal.

*External validity* refers to the representativeness, or generalizability, of research results. When researchers conduct a study, they draw a sample, or subset, of people from a population as potential participants. When they draw a sample, researchers must be certain it accurately represents the population. In many instances, only a few hundred people will actually complete a survey, and research professionals will use the responses of a few hundred participants to make inferences about the entire population, which may consist of millions of people. When research results are representative, researchers can accurately take sample responses and project them onto the entire population. Researchers use probability sampling methods, which require random-selection procedures, to ensure that everyone in a population has an equal chance of being included in a sample. If the sample accurately reflects the population and researchers use a scientific research method, the results of a study will be high in external validity and researchers will be able to generalize study results from a sample to the population with confidence.

In terms of practical implications, informal research methods generally lack external validity, which commonly causes problems in public relations. When researchers use focus groups, for example, they do not use probability sampling methods or choose a sample size large enough to produce results that are high in external validity. In fact, a lack of generalizability is one of the reasons researchers consider these methods informal. Researchers must use fully formal, scientific research methods, including probability-based sampling, to achieve a high degree of external validity.

Kerlinger (1973) illustrated *internal validity* with the simple question, "Are we measuring what we think we're measuring?" If, for example, we want to measure people's voting habits but instead ask for their opinions about how important it is to vote, we have not measured behavior and the measure potentially lacks internal validity. Many methods exist for identifying internal validity.

One of the simplest methods of determining validity is called *face validity*. When researchers check for face validity, they examine a research

measure to determine whether it appears to assess what they want it to measure in an obvious way. This form of validity relies on researchers' judgments and generally is nonscientific. For years market researchers measured brand awareness, for example, when they ultimately wanted to evaluate the effect of an advertising campaign on consumer purchase behavior. It seems obvious that increased brand name awareness should indicate that an advertising campaign is effective. Measuring top-of-the-mind awareness and using it as an indicator of consumer behavior, however, raises issues regarding the face validity of the measures.

*Content validity* refers to the comprehensive nature of research measures. Questions high in content validity most fully represent, or capture, the idea they are supposed to measure. When examining consumers' media-use habits, for example, a set of questions that measure only newspaper reading and television viewing lacks content validity. In this case, consumers are likely to use a variety of media that are not included in the questionnaire. A lack of content validity leaves a project seriously flawed by compromising its relevance.

A final type of validity, *predictive* or *criterion validity*, concerns the soundness of a research measure when tested against an external standard. In applied research, predictive validity most commonly concerns the ability of a research measure to predict actual performance. When a driving test has predictive validity, for example, it should be able to predict actual driving performance. People who perform well on a driving test should be able to drive a car safely. If they drive poorly despite performing well on the test, the test lacks predictive validity. Predictive validity is critical when organizations use research to understand and predict the behavior of targeted audience members based on research results. In public relations campaigns, practitioners often measure awareness and knowledge presuming that they lead to behavior. These measures often lack predictive validity, however, making the research findings an incomplete or incorrect basis from which to develop campaign strategy and predict campaign outcomes.

## STEPS TO RESEARCH PROJECT DESIGN

Once managers consider accuracy, precision, reliability, and validity as they relate to the research project at hand, they can turn to the actual design of the project. Despite the uniqueness of every research project, it helps to follow a series of steps in a more-or-less sequential order to guide the design and implementation of a project, as shown in Figure 5.4. The research plan discussed in chapter 4 largely corresponds to the steps followed to implement the project itself. The research-design process briefly discussed here contributes to an orderly decision-making process that maximizes the

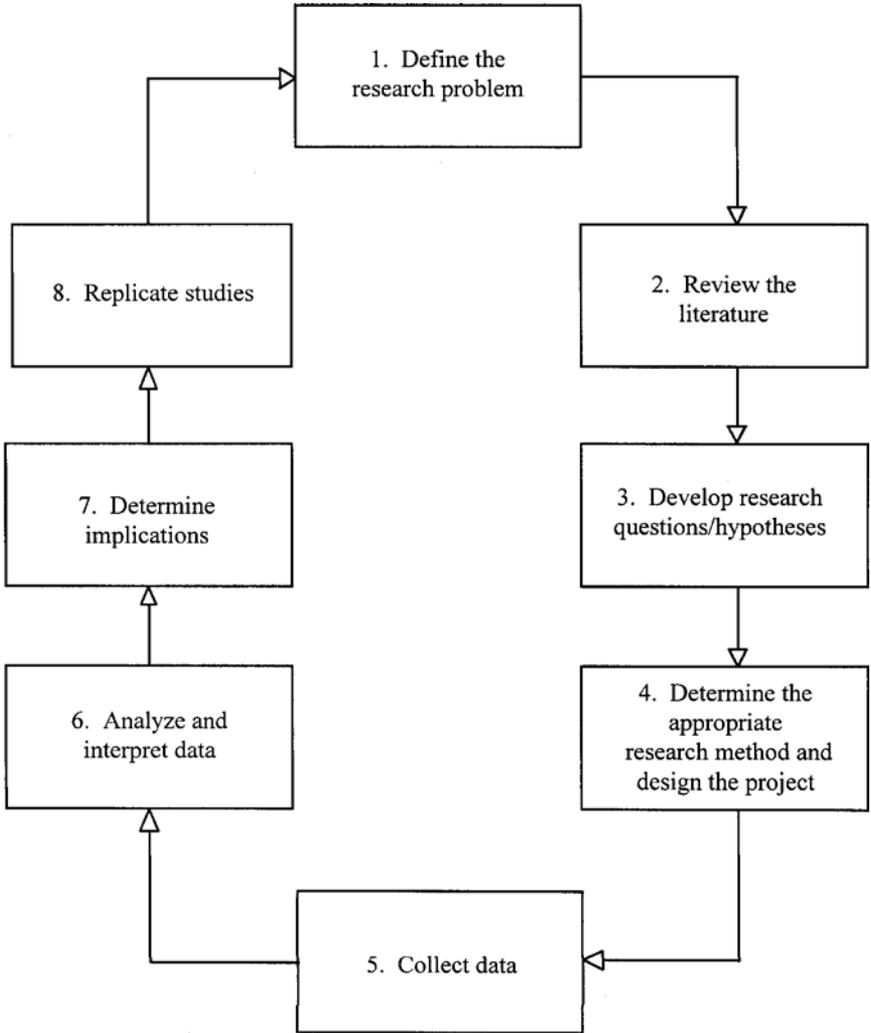


FIG. 5.4. The research process.

benefits of a study and the information outcomes it provides. It also can help minimize study costs and the risks associated with obtaining poor quality data.

1. *Identify or clearly define the research problem.* When research projects lack a well-defined purpose, they produce results that, although interesting, have little benefit. Clients often approach research firms with a relatively vague understanding of what they need to learn, with the expectation that the focus of the project will emerge and they will know what they want

when they see it. Even exploratory research projects should have clear direction.

2. *Review the literature.* This refers to checking existing sources of knowledge for useful information. At one time, managers found it difficult to get accurate, reliable market research. As organizations have increased in sophistication, their reliance on research has grown and the supply of existing research available to any organization has greatly increased. Various academic research publications, trade publications, syndicated market research, and databases can prove useful when practitioners develop a project. These resources can help practitioners define targeted audiences; provide insight into audience opinions, attitudes, and behavior; and answer secondary questions related to the primary research project.

3. *Develop research questions or hypotheses.* After examining existing sources of research information, managers can develop hypotheses or research questions. Essentially, hypotheses and research questions help researchers understand their study and the outcomes it is supposed to produce. In this way, they become part of the problem-identification process and give researchers specific outcomes to look for as they engage in a research project. In academic research, hypotheses (and research questions to a lesser extent) typically drive the research process and provide expectations about variable relationships and other important research findings. In applied research settings, researchers commonly use research questions instead of hypotheses. Both hypotheses and research questions can be used in applied research settings, however, to help determine the project purpose and to help inform the research-design process.

4. *Determine the appropriate research method and design the project.* Several methods exist for collecting information, and in this book we address the most common methods. Whether practitioners do a research project on their own, deal with an in-house research department, or contract with an outside research firm, they must understand the strengths and weaknesses of different research methods to make informed decisions and to gather useful and affordable information. Practitioners who stick to research methods because of familiarity, or who blindly follow the advice of others without understanding the strengths and limitations of different research methods, risk disappointment and, worse, can make decisions based on inaccurate results.

5. *Collect data.* Implementation of the study follows research-method selection and study design. In applied settings, informal research designs commonly require a less systematic application of data collection procedures than formal research methods because of their purposes, which may involve exploration or idea generation. Formal research methods, conversely, require researchers to carefully follow research procedures to ensure that they systematically measure participants' attitudes and behaviors producing unbiased results that are high in validity.

6. *Analyze and interpret data.* Data analysis and interpretation vary depending on the research method used and the nature of the data. Qualitative data, such as comments provided by focus group participants, typically require broad, subjective interpretations. Quantitative data, conversely—which might result from participants' answers to survey questions containing numerical response categories, for example—require statistical analysis and generally should produce objective results and interpretations. In either case, meaningful data analysis and interpretation are the natural outcomes of a well-designed, properly conducted research project.

7. *Determine implications.* After completion of a study, campaign strategists, planners, and others must carefully examine the results for their practical implications. What do these results suggest in terms of strategy or tactics? How should an organization attempt to frame an issue for members of a critical audience? What public affairs programs are likely to have the greatest audience impact according to study results? What media do these audience members regularly use? How do these results help improve understanding or, more important, motivate behavioral change? It is a waste of time and money to conduct a study and, after brief consideration, simply put the results on a shelf where they gather dust.

8. *Replicate studies.* As research projects provide answers to the questions they were designed to answer, they also raise new, important questions. These new questions typically are the genesis for additional research, and as organizational managers address these new issues in a systematic process, they move forward in terms of their understanding and ability to solve problems. This makes it critical for managers to make studies replicable, meaning reproducible, so that results build on each other.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Public relations programs increasingly rely on research-based planning and evaluation. The benefits of research—to illuminate the perceptions, interests, and opinions of targeted audiences; to produce evidence used to select from among competing solutions; and to provide a benchmark from which to evaluate campaign success—often far outweigh the costs of research. Some managers have the luxury of hiring out research projects to specialists, whereas others need to implement research projects on their own. Either way, a personal investment in learning about these sometimes complex topics can lead to increased credibility and autonomy for the communication manager. The following chapters provide a basic grounding in the most important aspects of applied public relations research.

# 6

## Making Research Decisions: Sampling

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Sampling is a powerful tool and a critical part of communication campaign research because it has a direct relationship to the generalizability of research results. Practitioners use sampling in partnership with the research methods they select to help them solve complex problems, monitor their internal and external environments, and engage in sophisticated campaign planning and evaluation. Sampling helps practitioners get accurate information quickly at a relatively low cost. It provides them with a cost-effective way to collect information from a relatively small number of target audience members, called a *sample*, and draw conclusions about an entire target audience. These processes are based on principles of statistical sampling and inference.

Although it sounds complex, sampling really is simple. If we want to know whether our spaghetti sauce needs more garlic, we usually taste a small sample. We do not need to eat all of the sauce to determine whether more garlic is needed (and by the way, the sauce almost always needs more garlic). Researchers sample people in the same way. It is not necessary to contact all members of a target audience to understand their opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. Instead, practitioners can learn this information from a properly selected sample of target audience members with a high degree of confidence that they are accurate. The purpose of this chapter is to explain basic aspects of sampling including both probability and nonprobability sampling methods and sample size calculations, in a simple, easy-to-understand manner. Math phobes, note that we use only a relatively small amount of math in this chapter. Instead of manipulating numbers, we want readers to develop a conceptual understanding of the principles of sampling and statistical inference.

## SAMPLING BASICS

Even though sampling methods are relatively easy to understand and use, understanding a few basic terms and concepts makes it easier to understand sampling practices. Although these definitions are not terribly interesting, they make it a lot easier to understand principles of sampling and inference. At a basic level, readers should understand the difference between a population and a sample. A *population* or *universe* consists of all the members of a group or an entire collection of objects. In public relations, a population most commonly refers to all the people in a target audience or public. When researchers conduct a *census*, they collect information from all members of a population to measure their attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and other characteristics. These measurements, called *parameters*, are the true values of a population's members; parameters are a characteristic or property of a population. In theory, parameters contain no error because they are the result of information collected from every population member. Often, parameters are expressed in summary form. If our research reveals that 59% of voters in King County, Washington, support a property tax initiative, for example, this characteristic is a parameter of the population of all voters in King County.

Research professionals and social scientists often find it difficult or impossible to conduct a census because they are expensive and time consuming. More important, a census is unnecessary in most situations. By collecting information from a carefully selected subset, or *sample*, of population members, researchers can draw conclusions about the entire population, often with a high degree of accuracy. This is why sampling is such a powerful part of communication campaign research.

A *sample* is a subset of a population or universe. When researchers conduct a survey using a sample, they use the resulting data to produce sample statistics. *Sample statistics* describe the characteristics of the sample in the same way that population parameters describe the characteristics of a population. Statistics result from the *observed scores* of sample members instead of from the true scores of all population members, and they necessarily contain some error because of this. The amount of error contained in sample statistics, however, usually is small enough that researchers can estimate, or infer, the attitudes, behaviors, and other characteristics of a population from sample statistics, often with a high degree of confidence.

If you find all of this confusing, read this section again slowly and it will become more clear, although no more exciting (we suggest taking two aspirin first). This topic and chapter improve in terms of their ease of understanding, but it is important for readers to have a basic understanding of sampling terminology and concepts before we discuss other aspects of sampling. It also becomes more clear as we move into discussions of sample representation, sampling techniques, and sample size calculations.

## GENERALIZING FROM A SAMPLE TO A POPULATION

Researchers normally collect data to make generalizations. During a state gubernatorial election in Michigan, for example, a political campaign manager may survey a sample of registered voters to determine the opinions of all registered voters in the state. In this case, the campaign manager wants to generalize the results of the survey from a relatively small sample (perhaps consisting of no more than several hundred people) to all registered voters in the state. This process of generalization, when researchers draw conclusions about a population based on information collected from a sample, is called *inference*. Researchers generalize findings from samples to populations on a regular basis. How can researchers generalize in this way and be confident they are right? A sample must accurately represent the population from which it is drawn to allow investigators to make valid inferences about the population based on sample statistics.

An often-used example from the annals of survey research helps make the point. In 1920, editors of the *Literary Digest* conducted a poll to see whether they could predict the winner of the presidential election between Warren Harding and James Cox. Editors gathered names and addresses from telephone directories and automobile registration lists and sent postcards to people in six states. Based on the postcards they received, the *Literary Digest* correctly predicted that Harding would win the election. *Literary Digest* editors repeated this same general process over the next several elections and correctly predicted presidential election winners in 1920, 1924, 1928, and 1932.

*Literacy Digest* editors again conducted a poll to predict the winner of the 1936 election. This project was their most ambitious yet. This time, they sent ballots to 10 million people whose names they drew from telephone directories and automobile registration lists, as before. More than 2 million ballots were returned. Based on the results of its survey, the editors predicted that Republican challenger Alfred Landon would receive 57% of the popular vote in a stunning upset over Democratic incumbent Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt was reelected, however, by the largest margin in history to date. He received approximately 61% of the popular vote and captured 523 electoral votes to Landon's 8. What went wrong?

Simply put, the sample was unrepresentative. *Literacy Digest* editors drew the sample from telephone directories and automobile registration lists, both of which were biased to upper income groups. At that time, less than 40% of American households had telephones and only 55% of Americans owned automobiles. The omission of the poor from the sample was particularly significant because they voted overwhelmingly for Roosevelt, whereas the wealthy voted primarily for Landon (Freedman, Pisani, & Purves, 1978). Not only was the sample unrepresentative, but the survey method and low response rate (24%) contributed to biased results.

This often-used example illustrates a key point about the importance of sample representativeness. The results of research based on samples that are not representative do not allow researchers to validly generalize, or project, research results. It is unwise for investigators to make inferences about a population based on information gathered from a sample when the sample does not adequately represent a population. It is a simple, but important, concept to understand.

In fact, George Gallup (of Gallup poll notoriety) understood the concept well. In July 1936, he predicted in print that the *Literacy Digest* poll would project Landon as the landslide winner and that the poll would be incorrect. He made these predictions months before the *Literacy Digest* poll was conducted. He also predicted that Roosevelt would win reelection and perhaps receive as much as 54% of the popular vote. Gallup's predictions were correct, even though his numbers concerning the election were off. How could Gallup be sure of his predictions? The primary basis of his explanation was that the *Literacy Digest* reached only middle- and upper-class individuals who were much more likely to vote Republican. In other words, he understood that the *Literacy Digest* sample was not representative (Converse, 1987). As an additional note, for those who believe that a larger sample always is better, here is evidence to the contrary. When researchers use *nonprobability* sampling methods, sample size has no scientifically verifiable effect on the representativeness of a sample. Sample size makes no difference because the sample simply is not representative of the population. A large, unrepresentative sample is as unrepresentative as a small, unrepresentative sample. In fact, had editors

used a probability sampling method along with an appropriate survey method, a sample size of less than 1% of the more than 2 million voters who responded to the *Digest* poll almost certainly would have produced a highly accurate prediction for both the *Literary Digest* editors and George Gallup.

## SAMPLING METHODS

*Sampling* is the means by which researchers select people or elements in a population to represent the entire population. Researchers use a *sampling frame*—a list of the members of a population—to produce a sample, using one of several methods to determine who will be included in the sample. Each person or object in the sample is a *sampling element* or *unit*. When practitioners study target audience members, the sampling frame typically consists of a list of members of a target audience, whereas the sampling unit is an individual person. All the sampling units together compose the sample. If a nonprofit organization wants to examine the perceptions and opinions of its donors, for example, the sampling frame might be a mailing list of donors' names and addresses, whereas the sampling unit would be the individual names and addresses selected from the list as part of the sample. When researchers generate a sample, they select sampling units from the sampling frame.

When researchers draw a sample, their goal is to accurately represent a population. This allows them to make inferences about the population based on information they collect from the sample. There are two types of samples: *probability* and *nonprobability*. Researchers select probability samples in a *random* way so that each member of a population has an equal chance, or probability, of being included in a sample. When researchers draw a nonprobability sample, an individual's chance of being included in a sample is not known. There is no way to determine the probability that any population member will be included in the sample because a *non-random* selection process is used. Some population members may have no chance of being included in a sample, whereas other population members may have multiple chances of being included in a sample.

When researchers select probability, or random, samples, they normally can make accurate inferences about the population under study based on information from the sample. That is, probability samples tend to produce results that are highly generalizable from a sample to a population. When researchers select samples in any way other than probability-based, random sampling, they cannot be sure that a sample accurately represents the population from which it was drawn. In this case, they have no basis for validly making inferences about a population from the sample. Even though a nonprobability sample may perfectly represent a population, investigators cannot scientifically demonstrate its level of representativeness.

For this reason, the results of research that use nonprobability samples are low in generalizability (external validity).

Why use nonprobability sampling if the research results it produces are not representative? In some cases, researchers may use a nonprobability sample because it is quick and easy to generate. At other times, the cost of generating a probability-based sample may be too high, so researchers use a less expensive nonprobability sample instead. The use of a nonprobability sample is not automatically a problem or even necessarily a concern. It is a significant limitation, however, in practitioners' application of research results to campaign planning and problem solving. Research managers often use nonprobability samples in exploratory research or other small-scale studies, perhaps as a precursor to a major study. In addition, some commonly used research methods, such as focus groups or mall intercept surveys, rely exclusively on nonprobability sampling.

The lack of generalizability should serve as a warning to communication campaign managers. Do not assume research results based on nonprobability samples are accurate. When practitioners want to explore a problem or potential solution in an informal fashion, get input on an idea, or obtain limited feedback from members of a target audience, a nonprobability sample normally is an acceptable choice. As editors of the *Literary Digest* discovered, however, nonprobability samples have limitations and should not serve as the sole basis by which practitioners seek to understand audiences and develop programs.

## NONPROBABILITY SAMPLING METHODS

There are several methods of generating nonprobability samples. No matter how random the selection process appears in each of these sampling methods, researchers do not select sample members in a random manner. This means that population members have an unequal chance of being selected as part of a sample when investigators use these sampling methods. The most common types of nonprobability sampling are incidental (also called *convenience*) sampling, quota sampling, dimensional sampling, purposive (judgmental) sampling, volunteer sampling, and snowball sampling.

### Incidental, or Convenience, Sampling

Researchers select incidental, or convenience, samples by using whoever is convenient as a sample element. A public opinion survey in which interviewers stop and survey those who walk by and are willing to participate constitutes such a sample. Mall intercepts generally rely on convenience samples because their sample consists of shoppers who happen to walk by and are willing to complete a questionnaire. Like all nonprobability

samples, incidental samples do not generally provide accurate estimates of the attributes of a target population. There simply is no way for researchers to determine the degree to which research results from a convenience sample are representative of a population. Like all nonprobability sampling methods, incidental samples are most appropriate when research is exploratory, precise statistics concerning a population are not required, or the target population is impossible to accurately define or locate (Johnson & Reynolds, 2005).

### **Quota Sampling**

When researchers use this sampling method, they often are interested in the subgroups that exist in a population and draw their sample so that it contains the same proportion of subgroups. Investigators fill the quotas nonrandomly, typically using sample members who are convenient to fill subgroup quotas. In practice, research staff members typically base quotas on a small number of population characteristics such as respondents' age, sex, educational level, type of employment, or race or ethnicity. An interviewer conducting a survey on a college campus, for example, might be assigned to interview a certain number of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The interviewer might select the sample nonrandomly by standing in front of the university library and asking people to complete a survey. Interviewers would stop surveying members of individual population subgroups as they filled each quota.

### **Dimensional Sampling**

This method is similar to quota sampling in that researchers select study participants nonrandomly according to predetermined quota, but project managers extend sample quotas to include a variety of population attributes. Generally, interviewers ensure that they include a minimum number of individuals for various combinations of criteria. Extending the college survey example, interviewers might nonrandomly select participants to meet additional criteria, or dimensions. Interviewers might have to interview a minimum number of males and females, traditional and non-traditional students, or married and unmarried students, for example, in addition to the class quota. Interviewers could use a seemingly endless number of potential attributes to stratify a sample.

No matter how many attributes research team members use when selecting a sample, they select both quota and dimensional sample members using nonprobability selection methods. The result is that researchers cannot determine whether their participants fully represent the similarities and differences that exist among subgroups in the population. Ultimately, there is no scientific way to determine whether a nonprobability sample is

representative and no scientific evidence to suggest quota sampling is more representative than other nonprobability sampling methods. Researchers correct the nonprobability selection weakness of quota sampling and dimensional sampling when they use *stratified* sampling, which we address shortly.

### **Purposive Sampling**

In purposive, or *judgmental*, sampling, researchers select sample members because they meet the special needs of the study based on the interviewer's judgment. A researcher's goal when using purposive sampling typically is to examine a specially selected population that is unusually diverse or particularly limited in some way, rather than to study a larger, more uniform population (Johnson & Reynolds, 2005). If a product manufacturer wants to open a new plant in another country, for example, company management needs to learn the concerns of local business, government, and labor leaders. In this case, the sample is relatively small and diverse, and interviewers may simply select sample members using their own discretion to determine which respondents fit into the sample and are "typical" or "representative." This creates situations in which sample-selection decisions may vary widely among interviewers. Even if the definition of the population is reasonably clear, the procedures researchers use when drawing a sample may vary greatly among interviewers, limiting the comparability of sample members (Warwick & Lininger, 1975). These nonrandom selection procedures limit the generalizability of research results based on purposive samples, as is the case with all nonprobability sampling methods.

### **Volunteer Sampling**

When media organizations ask viewers to call in or e-mail their opinions, they are using a volunteer, or self-selected, sample. Instant phone-in polls have become a common way for the media to determine and report so-called public opinion, for example, in an attempt to attract and keep the interests of viewers and listeners. There are numerous potential sources of bias when research is based on a volunteer sample. First, sample representation is hindered because only the people who are exposed to the survey have an opportunity to participate. All other potential respondents are unaware of the poll. Second, those who feel strongly about the topic of a poll may view the survey as an opportunity to vote for their viewpoint. Such individuals may respond more than once and/or encourage other like-minded individuals to respond in the same way. The result is that volunteer samples are not representative, and research results based on volunteer samples are highly untrustworthy. Organizations that use

volunteer samples should use them strictly for their entertainment value, not their scientific value.

### **Snowball Sampling**

When researchers use snowball sampling, they collect data from a limited number of population members and then ask these individuals to identify other members of the population who might be willing to participate in the study. The sample continues to grow as new research participants direct interviewers to additional sample prospects. The sample snowballs, starting from a small number of people and growing larger as each new participant suggests other potential participants.

Researchers may have no choice but to have to rely on snowball sampling when they can locate only a few members of a population. If a social welfare organization wanted to learn about the particular difficulties of migrant workers, for example, it might start by interviewing those migrant workers it could locate. After each interview was concluded, interviewers could ask participants to identify other workers who might be willing to participate in the study. Interviewers hope the sample would grow to a desirable size through this process. Research results based on such a sample, however, have little or no generalizability, no matter how large the sample grows. A snowball sample relies on nonrandom methods of selection, and there is no way to scientifically determine the degree to which it represents the population from which it is drawn because of this. As with all projects based on nonprobability samples, managers need to interpret and generalize research findings resulting from snowball samples carefully.

## **PROBABILITY SAMPLING METHODS**

Researchers generate probability samples using a random selection process so that each member of a population has an equal chance, or probability, of being included in a sample. The use of probability sampling normally allows investigators to make accurate inferences about a population based on information collected from a sample. Investigators' inferences, or conclusions, about the population are not perfectly accurate even when they use probability sampling. Researchers calculate estimates of the population parameter within a given range of possible values at a specific level of probability. The result of this process is that research findings based on probability samples normally are highly representative. That is, they possess a high degree of generalizability, or external validity. The most common type of probability sample is simple random sampling. Common variations of simple random sampling include systematic sampling, stratified sampling, and cluster sampling.

## Simple Random Sampling

Researchers must ensure that each member of a population has an equal chance of being included in a sample and select each sample element independently to produce a random sample. Simple random sampling is the most basic method of random sampling, and investigators use it to ensure that the sample they produce is representative of the population. Although true representation never is guaranteed unless a census is taken, the use of a random-selection process significantly reduces the chances of subgroup overrepresentation or underrepresentation, which helps eliminate sample bias. Researchers then can estimate, or infer, population parameters based on sample statistics. Although these inferences are not perfect—they have some error—investigators use statistical procedures to understand this error as noted previously.

From a practical standpoint, the primary requirement for simple random sampling is that researchers clearly and unambiguously identify each member of a population through the use of a comprehensive sampling frame. This allows the direct, independent, and random selection of sample elements, typically through a list in which each element is identified (Warwick & Lininger, 1975). The most common methods of simple random sampling use a list of population members for a sample frame. Research staff members might number each element on the list sequentially, for example, and select the sample by using a table of random numbers or a computer program that produced random numbers. Each number selected by researchers would correspond with a member of the sampling frame. The result is a random sample that normally is highly representative of its population.

If the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) wanted to survey its members to determine their level of satisfaction with its programs and services, a project manager could take a membership list and assign a number to each PRSA member sequentially. The manager would create the sample by randomly generating numbers assigned to specific PRSA members. Staff members would produce more numbers until they generated an appropriate sample size. If properly conducted, this random process would produce a probability sample of PRSA members who have a high likelihood of accurately representing the attitudes and opinions of all the members of PRSA.

## Systematic Random Sampling

Researchers use an unbiased system to select sample members from a list when they use systematic random sampling. This system allows them to generate a probability-based sample that normally is highly representative of the population from which it was drawn, without some of the inconveniences associated with simple random sampling. Those who use simple

random sampling often find the process long and unnecessarily tedious, especially when a population is large. When researchers use systematic random sampling, they develop an uncomplicated system using the total sample size and the size of the population to help them draw a probability-based sample relatively easily.

First, research team members determine the final number of completed interviews they need for a study. Researchers often need to generate a total sample that is several times larger than their targeted number of completed interviews because of the number of sample elements who are difficult to contact or who refuse to participate in a survey. Once researchers determine the total sample size, they determine a *sampling interval* by dividing the number of elements in the sampling frame (this is the total population) by the desired total sample size. The result is a number ( $n$ ) that researchers use to generate a sample by selecting every  $n^{\text{th}}$  element from a sampling frame. Researchers must select the first sample element randomly from the frame to produce a probability sample, so they randomly select the first element from within the sampling interval. They complete the sample-selection process by selecting every  $n^{\text{th}}$  element from the sampling frame and the result is a systematic random sample.

An example helps to clarify systematic random sampling. If corporate personnel managers want to survey their classified staff as part of a program to improve employee relations, their first step is to determine the final number of completed interviews they want for the study. We discuss sample size calculations later in this chapter, but for this example, let's say that after some careful thinking and a little fun with math, administrators determine they want a total of approximately 400 completed interviews from the approximately 6,000 employees who work as full- or part-time classified staff. After some additional calculations (explained in chapter 12), researchers determine that an original total sample size of 850 classified staff members would produce about 400 completed surveys from participants, as shown in Figure 6.1. The projects' directors decide to use a mailing list of classified staff members as a sampling frame because it contains the names and addresses of all classified staff members and has no duplicate listings. They divide the sampling frame (6,000) by the original sample size (850) to determine the sampling interval (approximately 7). Project managers must select the first sample element randomly, so they use a table of random numbers to produce the first number between 1 and 7. If project managers drew the number 5, they would draw the sample by selecting the fifth name on the list and selecting every seventh name after that. Thus, researchers would draw name 5, name 12, name 19, name 26, and so on. By using the sampling interval, researchers produce a systematic random sample.

Systematic random samples and simple random samples are not exactly the same; however, systematic samples closely approximate simple random samples to produce a probability sample that normally is highly representative. In terms of bias, the greatest danger researchers face when

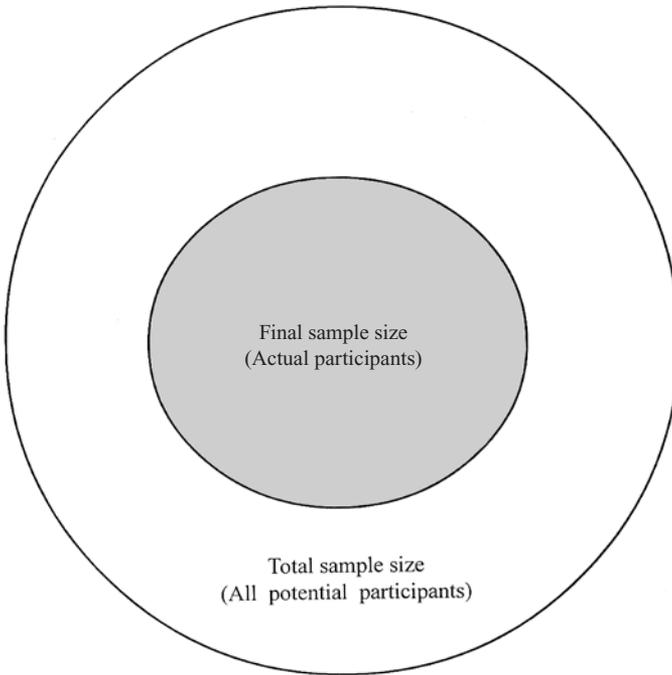


FIG. 6.1. The relationship of final sample size to total sample size. Communication managers need to generate a total original sample that is several times larger than required for their final sample because of the number of people who cannot be contacted or refuse to participate in a survey.

they use systematic sampling is periodicity. *Periodicity* refers to bias that occurs when a sampling list has a cyclical repetition of some population characteristic that coincides with a sampling interval. If this occurs, the sample elements selected are not generalizable to the population from which they were drawn. Researchers should be careful to inspect population lists before sampling to make sure there are no obvious signs of periodicity. When researchers are careful, the potential for bias in systematic sampling normally is small. Ultimately, researchers use systematic random sampling more than simple random sampling because of its simplicity and usefulness in complex sampling situations (Sudman, 1976).

### Stratified Sampling

Researchers divide a population into different subgroups, or *strata*, when they engage in stratified sampling, similar to quota sampling. The key difference between the methods is that investigators use a random, probability-based method to select sample elements when they engage in stratified sampling, whereas they use a nonrandom, nonprobability-based

method to select sample elements when they engage in quota sampling. Researchers have two primary reasons for stratification: to control the representativeness of the sample and to use different probability-based selection procedures in different strata (Warwick & Lininger, 1975). Researchers also may use stratified sampling when they are primarily interested in the key similarities and differences among members of strata, when the prior information they have for individual strata is different, or when they want to improve sampling efficiency when research costs differ by strata (Sudman, 1976).

Researchers use two types of stratified sampling: proportional and disproportional. When they use *proportional* sampling, project managers draw sample members from each stratum in proportion to their existence in the population. The resulting sample proportionally represents individual strata as they exist in a population. Researchers use *disproportionate* sampling to help ensure that the overall sample accurately produces results that represent the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of a significant stratum within the population. Project managers may use disproportionate sampling when strata are too small to be accurately represented in a sample selected through other means. In this case, research staff may find it necessary to weight the data to obtain unbiased estimates of the total population. This may be necessary, for example, when researchers' use of other probability sampling methods would underrepresent the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of minority members of a population. When researchers use either proportional or disproportional stratified sampling to their advantage, they can produce highly representative, probability-based samples.

### Cluster Sampling

Researchers select sample elements using groups rather than individuals when they use cluster sampling. The sample frame consists of clusters rather than individuals, and each cluster serves as a sample element. The clusters researchers use for sampling commonly are preexisting natural groups or administrative groups of the population. These may include geographical designations such as neighborhoods, cities, counties, or zip code areas, for example, or other common groupings such as universities, hospitals, or schools.

Researchers often use cluster sampling to make data collection more efficient (Sudman, 1976). If a metropolitan school district wanted to learn about the attitudes and experiences of its students, it could send interviewers to meet one on one with individually selected student sample members. This process, however, would be expensive and increase the time needed to complete the project. If researchers used schools as sample clusters and randomly selected from among them, the project would require less time and travel, which would increase the efficiency of data collection.

Investigators also use cluster sampling when a comprehensive list of sample elements is not available. If an organization wanted to sample city residents as part of a community relations program, project managers would likely have trouble locating a complete list of all community residents, and the process would be costly and time consuming. If researchers wanted to use cluster sampling, they could create a sampling frame by using city blocks as clusters. After research staff identified and labeled each block, they could randomly select an appropriate number of blocks. Next, researchers would randomly sample dwelling units within each block. Finally, interviewers would randomly sample people living in each dwelling unit and collect data. Researchers call this sampling process *multistage sampling* because sampling takes place in different stages; they select city blocks in stage one, followed by dwelling units in stage two and individual people in stage three.

Researchers' primary concern when using cluster sampling is the potential for increased error relative to other probability-based sampling methods. When investigators use cluster sampling, standard error may increase if sample members' attitudes, behaviors, and other characteristics generally are the same, or homogeneous, within each cluster. In this instance, samples selected from within homogeneous clusters will not reflect the diversity of attitudes and behaviors that exist in the larger population. Project managers can help counter this problem by selecting a high number of small clusters and selecting a relatively low number of sample elements from within each cluster (Johnson & Reynolds, 2005).

Cluster samples, along with systematic and stratified samples, are acceptable alternatives to simple random sampling. In each case, population elements have an equal chance of being included in a sample. Ultimately, researchers' choice of a sampling method often depends on the time and money available for a project, the population being sampled, the subject under investigation, and the availability of a comprehensive list of target population members.

### HOW BIG SHOULD A SAMPLE BE?

One of the first questions clients, managers, and others involved in a research project typically ask is "What is the best sample size for a project?" Unfortunately, as is the case so often in life and particularly in survey research, the answer is a firm "it depends." In fact, the methods researchers use to determine the appropriate sample size for a study can be relatively complicated and even controversial. Research professionals often use different formulas to calculate sample size—in some cases based on different assumptions about population characteristics—and may suggest conflicting sample sizes as a result. Several common misperceptions exist concerning sample size calculations including the following:

*Myth 1: Bigger samples are better.* The *Literary Digest* case demonstrates the fallacy concerning bigger sample sizes. When researchers use probability sampling methods, a mathematically calculated sample size based on an appropriate formula nearly always produces trustworthy results with known ranges of error. Researchers can use simple math to verify this information. When researchers use non-probability sampling methods, there is no scientific way to determine how well a sample represents a population or how much error survey results contain. Remember, a large unrepresentative sample is no more representative than a small unrepresentative sample. In addition, a representative sample that is unnecessarily large is a waste of resources. A sample's size should be the result of a researcher's purposeful decision-making process, not a number that researchers stumble upon as they try to generate the largest sample possible.

*Myth 2: As a rule of thumb, researchers should sample a fixed percentage of a population to produce an acceptable sample size.* It is not uncommon for those uninitiated in survey research methods to suggest using a fixed percentage of the population to determine sample size. If researchers sampled 10% of a 50,000-person population, for example, they would generate a sample of 5,000 participants. Once again, probability-based sampling methods allow the use of mathematical formulas to calculate sample sizes that normally produce highly trustworthy results with known ranges of error. Arbitrarily sampling a certain percentage of the population is unnecessary and results in an arbitrary sample size. Such a practice is as illogical as if you ate a certain percentage of the food in your refrigerator because you were hungry. Just as the amount of food you eat should be based on your body's needs (with notable exceptions for mocha almond fudge ice cream and chocolate in any form), so should a study's sample size be based on the requirements of a research project instead of on an arbitrary percentage of a population.

*Myth 3: Researchers should base sample sizes on industry standards or "typical" sample sizes used in other research projects.* In reality, there is little that is standard about a research project. Although researchers may use familiar formulas to determine the sample size for a study, they should not use these formulas without careful consideration. A project's unique needs, the individual characteristics of a population and its resulting sample, and other issues greatly affect sampling decisions. Researchers serve the needs of clients and organizations best when they make thoughtful sample-size decisions, based on the unique requirements of individual research projects.

Having said all of this, we must engage in a small amount of backpedaling. Many communication students (and some campaign practitioners for that matter) have varying degrees of math phobia and short attention spans when it comes to highly technical or theoretical information. It is necessary to understand a little theory and use a small amount of basic algebra to calculate sample sizes. With this in mind, in this text we use simple sample-size calculation formulas and avoid math when possible. We also try to provide a basic conceptual understanding of these formulas and the concepts they use. In short, we take some shortcuts to make these topics as accessible as possible. The result is that we do not follow our own advice in some instances. Please keep in mind that there is more to this sometimes complicated topic than we discuss in this text. If you find these basic concepts and formulas easy to understand, or if you will be involved in research on a regular basis, you should read more about additional aspects of sampling and sample-size calculations so that you are fully informed.

For the math-challenged among us, we offer our encouragement. Read the next section slowly, draw pictures of the concepts if it helps you understand them, and try the math out yourself. Put in a little effort and you should emerge with a clear understanding of the topic. To explain sample-size calculations, first we provide a conceptual understanding of sample-calculation concepts and processes. Then, we do some basic sample-size calculations, based on the concepts we have explained. Finally, we calculate the amount of error that exists in survey data once researchers have completed a survey.

## CALCULATING THE APPROPRIATE SAMPLE SIZE

Anyone can determine with precision the optimal size for a sample, provided they understand a few key concepts based on probability theory and a bell-shaped curve. These concepts include sample distribution and standard deviation, confidence level, confidence interval, and variance. Once you grasp these concepts, it is easy to understand the basis for sample-size calculations; the rest is simply a matter of applying the formulas.

### Sample Distribution and Standard Deviation

Sample distribution and standard deviation are the first and, in some ways, most complex concepts to understand. A *sample distribution* is a grouping or arrangement of a characteristic that researchers measure for each sample member, and it reflects the frequency with which researchers assign sample characteristics to each point on a measurement scale (Williams, 1992). Almost any characteristic that researchers can measure has a sampling distribution, but in survey research investigators typically study sample members' opinions, attitudes, behaviors, and related characteristics. If we

were to chart a sampling distribution, the result would be shaped like a bell, provided the sampling distribution was normal. It would be tall in the middle where the average of the sampling distribution is located because most people would be near the average. There would be fewer people toward either edge, or tails, of the bell because fewer people would have characteristics or behaviors so far above or below the average.

If we were practitioners at a university health facility, for example, we might conduct a survey to better understand smoking behavior among students. We could ask a randomly selected student sample to fill out a questionnaire that contained attitudinal and behavioral questions, including a question about the number of cigarettes participants had smoked in the previous 7 days. Participants' responses likely would vary greatly. Many students would have smoked no cigarettes in the previous 7 days, whereas other students would have smoked a high number of cigarettes. When we compute students' responses to our smoking question, we could use the information to generate a sample distribution. If our research revealed the average number of cigarettes smoked in the past week by participants was 3.5, this number would be placed under the middle of the curve at its tallest point and most participants would be near the average, or mean, in the large part of the bell-shaped distribution. Our sample's smoking distribution would get smaller at its tails because fewer participants would smoke in numbers that were far above or below average. Figure 6.2 contains a normally distributed, bell-shaped curve for the smoking example.

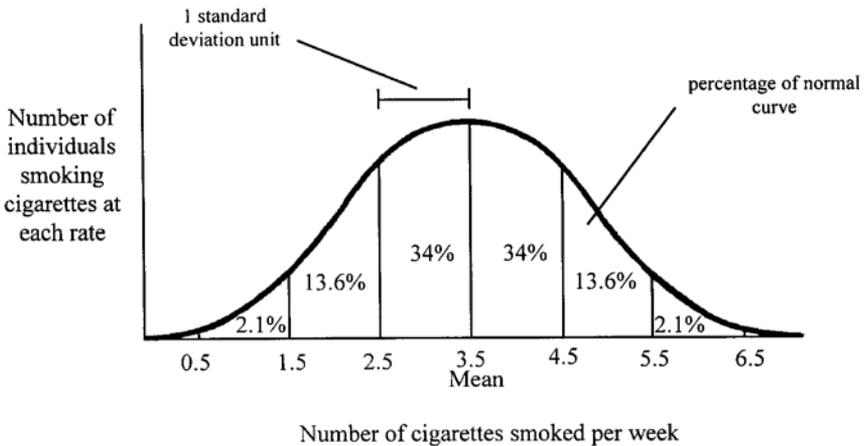


FIG. 6.2. Smoking distribution example. The number in each portion of the curve shows the percentage of the sample that corresponds to each segment. For example, 34% of this sample smokes between 2.5 and 3.5 cigarettes per week. The percentages added together equal more than 99% of a normal distribution. The segments of the curve are divided according to standard deviations from the mean.

As we planned our campaign, we could make inferences about the population (all students at our university) based on the responses of our sample. Error occurs when researchers take measurements from a sample and use them to make inferences about a population because there are differences between a sample distribution and a population distribution. We could not determine the exact average number of cigarettes smoked weekly by students at our university, for example, unless we conducted a census by interviewing every student. We did not conduct a census in this example and because of this, the responses of our sample would not exactly represent the true responses of the population. In our smoking survey, our sample mean for cigarettes smoked in the past 7 days might be 3.5, whereas the true value for the population might be 3.8. The difference between the opinions and behaviors of the sample and the opinions and behaviors of the population is *error*.

As researchers, we must understand this error, so we use a tool to measure it called *standard deviation*. Standard deviation is a standardized measure of dispersion (or variation) around a mean. Basically, a standard deviation is a standardized unit of measurement that researchers use to measure distances from a sampling distribution's midpoint to its outer limits (don't get lost here). Think of standard deviation as a simple unit of measurement. Researchers use standard deviation to measure distance from the mean in a bell-shaped curve in the same way a carpenter uses inches to measure the length of a board, as Figure 6.3 shows.

Researchers use standard deviation for various purposes. If the publishers of a book survey 10 people and ask them to read and rate it using a

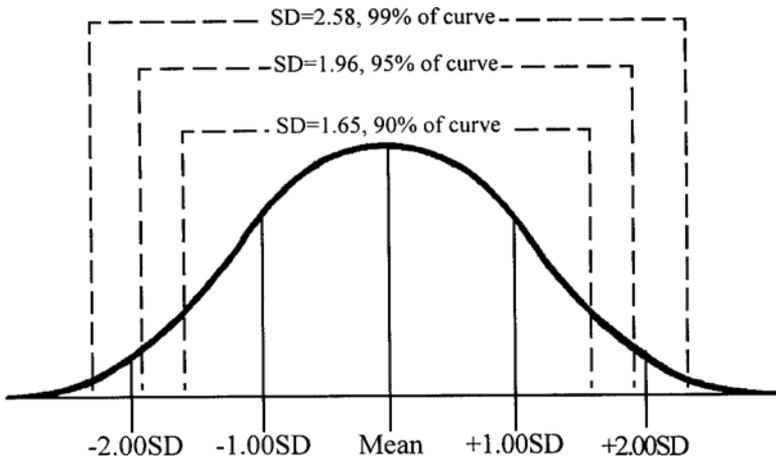


FIG. 6.3. Normally distributed bell-shaped curve. Along the normal distribution, 1.65 standard deviations (SD) measure 90% of the curve; 1.96 standard deviations measure 95% of the curve; and 2.58 standard deviations measure 99% of the curve.

scale of 0 to 10, for example, the text might receive an average rating of 5. If all 10 people who read the book actually rated the text as a 5, the average rating is highly accurate and there is no standard deviation. If 5 people rate the text as a 10, however, and 5 people rate the text as a 0, the mean rating still is 5. This time, however, the average rating is not very accurate. No one, in fact, actually gave the text a 5 rating. The standard deviation would be relatively large because there is a lot of dispersion among the scores. Although the means are the same in each case, they actually are different, and standard deviation helps us measure and understand this. Using our smoking survey example, if every participant in our smoking survey said they smoked 3.5 cigarettes in the past 7 days, our mean would be highly accurate and we would have no deviation from the mean. When we ask sample members about their smoking habits, however, we will undoubtedly receive different responses, and we can use the mean and standard deviation to understand these responses.

How do standard deviation and sample distribution help us when we calculate sample size? A standard deviation gives researchers a basis for estimating the probability of correspondence between the normally distributed, bell-shaped curve of a perfect population distribution and a probability-based sample distribution that always contains some error. Researchers call standard deviation measurements *standard* because they associate with, or measure, specific areas under a normal curve. One standard deviation measures about 68% of a normally distributed curve; two standard deviations measure a little more than 95% of a normally distributed curve; and three standard deviations measure more than 99% of a normally distributed curve. Research professionals use standard deviations to determine the confidence level associated with a sample, as we demonstrate later in this chapter.

## Confidence Level

A *confidence level* is the degree of certainty researchers can have when they draw inferences about a population based on data from a sample. Basically, it is the level of probability researchers have that they can accurately generalize a characteristic they find in a sample to a population. In essence, the confidence level answers the question, "How confident are we that our sample is representative of the population?" A confidence level of 90% means researchers are 90% confident that the sample accurately represents the population. In the same way, a confidence level of 95% means researchers are 95% confident that the inferences they draw about the population from the sample are accurate.

This raises an important question: Are researchers really 90% or 95% confident about the representativeness of the sample, or are they simply guessing, perhaps based on their experience? In fact, researchers' claims

of a confidence level are accurate because the confidence level is based on standard deviations. Remember, a standard deviation allows researchers to estimate probability between a normally distributed population curve and a less-than-perfect sampling distribution because standard deviation measurements associate with specific areas under the curve. A standard deviation of 1.65 measures 90% of a normally distributed curve, a standard deviation of 1.96 measures 95% of a normally distributed curve, and a standard deviation of 2.58 measures 99% of a normally distributed curve (remember these numbers because we will use them again shortly).

This means that when researchers calculate sample size, they select standard deviations associated with specific areas under a normally distributed curve to provide the desired confidence level. When investigators use 1.65 in the sample-size formula, they calculate a sample size that provides a 90% confidence level; when they use 1.96 in the formula, they calculate a sample size that provides a 95% confidence level; when they use 2.58 in the formula, they calculate a sample size that provides a 99% confidence level.

Most often, researchers use 1.96 standard deviations to calculate sample size, resulting in a 95% confidence level. A confidence level of 95% means our sample statistics will more-or-less accurately represent the true parameter of a population 95% of the time. Here is another way to think about this: If we conducted a survey of the same population 100 times, our sample responses would be accurate in 95 of the 100 surveys we conducted. The 95% confidence level is a standard convention of social science, but researchers can use other confidence levels. In particular, if researchers desire an exceptionally high degree of confidence when making inferences about a population based on data from a sample, they may choose a higher confidence level. Rarely do researchers use a lower confidence level.

## Confidence Interval

A *confidence interval* is a range or margin of error that researchers permit when making inferences from a sample to a population. As noted, the inferences researchers make about a population based on sample data are not completely accurate. Unless investigators conduct a census, the observed values they collect from a sample (statistics) will not provide completely accurate information concerning a population's true values (parameters).

The population parameter falls somewhere within the range of the confidence interval, although researchers never are exactly sure where the parameter is located unless they conduct a census. The confidence interval usually is stated as a positive-to-negative range, such as  $\pm 3\%$  error or  $\pm 5\%$  error. A confidence interval of  $\pm 3\%$  has a total error margin of 6%, whereas a confidence interval of  $\pm 5\%$  has a total error margin of 10%. If 57% of registered voters in California express support for a citizens' initiative in a

survey with a  $\pm 5\%$  confidence interval, for example, the true population value may be as high as 62% (+5%) or as low as 52% (-5%).

What is an acceptable confidence interval for survey results? As is often the case in survey research, the answer depends on various factors. Many applied communication and market research surveys have a  $\pm 5\%$  confidence interval, but there is nothing critical about this range of error. Researchers commonly choose smaller confidence levels when they want to reduce the margin of error and increase the precision of the inferences they draw concerning a population. When media organizations poll the public to predict election outcomes, for example, they often use a smaller confidence interval, such as  $\pm 3\%$ . Ultimately, researchers should make decisions about confidence intervals based on the necessities and challenges of individual research projects.

It may surprise you to learn that the confidence level and the confidence interval do not have to add to 100%. Those new to research often assume the confidence level and confidence interval must add to 100% because researchers often conduct surveys with a  $\pm 5\%$  error at a 95% confidence level. It is incidental that these numbers add up to 100. It is legitimate to conduct a survey with a  $\pm 3\%$  margin of error at a 95% confidence level, for example, or a survey with a  $\pm 2.5\%$  margin of error at a 99% confidence level. In addition, many researchers use a 95% confidence level as a standard and only make adjustments to the confidence interval when calculating sample size. As we noted previously, researchers should make decisions concerning confidence levels and confidence intervals based on the requirements of individual research projects.

## Variance

Simply put, *variance* is dispersion. When researchers calculate sample size, it helps them to understand how the characteristic or variable they are examining is dispersed throughout a population. If we want to understand the use of public transportation in our community as a way to reduce traffic and pollution, for example, it would be useful to know the percentage of community members who actually use public transportation. In short, we want to know how public transportation use is dispersed throughout our community as a characteristic of the population.

For research purposes, it is useful to consider variance as a simple percentage. Community members who use public transportation, for example, fit into one category that makes up a certain percentage of the population. Community members who do not use public transportation do not belong in this category and make up the remaining percentage of the population. Together, the percentages add up to 100%. Researchers can examine the dispersion of most variables this way because a population can be divided into two categories on the basis of almost any characteristic. This

includes, for example, students who smoke cigarettes and students who do not smoke cigarettes, community residents who live in a certain neighborhood and residents who live in other neighborhoods, workers who are employed and workers who are unemployed, and people who drink coffee and people who do not.

Any time researchers examine a variable or characteristic, they want to know its dispersion within a population because they can use this information to help them calculate sample size. Population members who have a characteristic or variable fit into a single category, and researchers use this to distinguish them from the rest of the population. In the formula we examine shortly, the percentage of a population that belongs to a category is expressed as a decimal. The remaining percentage of the population (that does not belong to the category) also is expressed as a decimal and subtracted from 1. Together, these two numbers add to 1.0 or 100% of the population.

Despite the importance of variance, researchers often set aside variance percentages when they calculate sample size because percentages only reflect the dispersion of a single characteristic or variable in a population. Researchers commonly examine multiple variables in a single survey, each with a different percentage of dispersion. Each variable would require a different sample size, which is impractical and unnecessary. Researchers address this problem by using the largest measure of variance available to calculate sample size because, at a minimum, it provides an acceptable measure of dispersion for all variables. To use the largest measure of variance, researchers use .5 (or 50%) as the percentage of a population that belongs to a category. Researchers also use .5 as the percentage for the rest of the population because  $1 - .5 = .5$  and these percentages add up to 1.0, or 100%, of the population. Although it is not necessary for researchers to use .5 and  $1 - .5$  in every sample-size calculation, this practice is regularly required by the necessities of a multifaceted research project, and so we use it in all of our sample-size calculations.

### SAMPLE-SIZE FORMULA

Now that you understand standard deviation, confidence level, confidence interval, and variance, you are ready to calculate sample size. Researchers commonly use the following formula—or formulas that are similar but more complicated—to calculate sample size:

$$n = \left( \frac{cl}{ci} \right)^2 (v)(1 - v)$$

where

$n$  (number) = the number of completed interviews or what we call the final sample size

$cl$  (confidence level) = the standard deviation associated with a specific area under a normal curve and corresponding to the desired confidence level (by definition, 90% confidence level = 1.65; 95% confidence level = 1.96; and 99% confidence level = 2.58)

$ci$  (confidence interval) = the margin of error expressed as a decimal ( $\pm 3\%$  error would be expressed as .03;  $\pm 5\%$  error would be expressed as .05;  $\pm 10\%$  error would be expressed as .10)

$v$  (variance) = the variance or distribution of a variable in a population, expressed as a percentage in decimal form. For our purposes, variance is always .5. Note also that  $1 - v$  is the percentage of a population that has no variable distribution;  $1 - v$  always is .5 when  $v$  is .5, as we have recommended.

Here is a basic sample-size calculation using this formula. We calculate the sample size at a 95% confidence level and a  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error, or confidence interval:

$$n = \left( \frac{1.96}{.05} \right)^2 (.5) (.5) = 384$$

Based on this formula, we need a final sample size of 384 people—or 384 completed interviews—to produce findings with a  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error at a 95% confidence level.

What if we want less error (a smaller confidence interval), meaning more trust in the precision of our survey results? It is easy to adjust the formula to fit the demands of any research situation. In the following calculations, for example, we determine sample sizes based on different confidence levels. We calculate each sample size with a  $\pm 5\%$  confidence interval, but with different confidence levels to show how different confidence levels affect sample size. To change confidence levels, we use standard deviations that correspond to different areas under a normally distributed, bell-shaped curve. Recall that the standard deviation for a 90% confidence level is 1.65; the standard deviation for a 95% confidence level is 1.96, and the standard deviation for a 99% confidence level is 2.58. Notice that we increase sample size as we increase the confidence level. The only difference in each calculation is the level of confidence researchers have when they make inferences from a sample to a population. Here is the final sample size—or number of completed interviews—needed for a survey with a 90% confidence level and a  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error:

$$n = \left( \frac{1.65}{.05} \right)^2 (.5) (.5) = 272$$

Here is the final sample size (number of completed interviews) for a survey with a 95% confidence level and a  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error:

$$n = \left( \frac{1.96}{.05} \right)^2 (.5)(.5) = 384$$

Finally, here is the sample size (number of completed interviews) for a survey with a 99% confidence level with a  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error:

$$n = \left( \frac{2.58}{.05} \right)^2 (.5)(.5) = 666$$

How do changes in the margin of error, or confidence interval, affect final sample size (the completed number of interviews) researchers need? In the following calculations, we determine sample sizes with the same level of confidence but differing margins of error. Each sample size is calculated at a 95% confidence level. Here is the final sample size for a survey with a  $\pm 10\%$  margin of error at a 95% confidence level:

$$n = \left( \frac{1.96}{.10} \right)^2 (.5)(.5) = 96$$

Here is the final sample size for a survey with a  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error at a 95% confidence level:

$$n = \left( \frac{1.96}{.05} \right)^2 (.5)(.5) = 384$$

Finally, here is the final sample size for a survey with a  $\pm 3\%$  margin of error at a 95% confidence level:

$$n = \left( \frac{1.96}{.03} \right)^2 (.5)(.5) = 1,067$$

In each case, we reduced the margin of error while maintaining a consistent level of confidence.

## ERROR CALCULATIONS

The same information you learned to calculate sample size also will help you calculate the margin of error for a survey, once you have collected data. In most cases, the number of completed interviews—or what we call the *final sample size*—is not 384 or 1,060 completed interviews, even if this is researchers' targeted sample size. Researchers aiming for a specific

sample size typically collect additional interviews for various reasons. Research staff may have to throw out some interviews, for example, because of problems with data collection, such as a survey that is only partially complete. At other times, researchers may collect a larger sample size so they have a stronger basis from which to make sample subgroup comparisons. Regardless of the reason, researchers can use standard deviation, confidence level, and variance to calculate the margin of error that exists in a survey's results based on its final sample size. Here is the formula:

$$e = cl \sqrt{\frac{(v)(1 - v)}{n}}(100)$$

where

*e* (error) = the final margin of error for the completed survey based on sample size

*cl* (confidence level) = the standard deviation associated with a specific area under a normal curve and corresponding to the desired confidence level (as before, 90% confidence level = 1.65; 95% confidence level = 1.96; and 99% confidence level = 2.58)

*v* (variance) = the variance or distribution of a variable in a population, expressed as a percentage in decimal form. As before, variance always is .5, and 1 - *v* is the percentage of a population that has no variable distribution; 1 - *v* always is .5, when *v* is .5 as we have recommended;

*n* (number) = the number of completed interviews or what we call the final sample size.

Here is the margin of error for a survey in which the final sample size, or number of completed interviews, is 485. The calculation is made based on a 95% confidence level:

$$1.96 \sqrt{\frac{(.5)(.5)}{485}}(100) = 4.45$$

In this example, the margin of error for this survey is ±4.45% based on 485 completed interviews.

How do changes in the confidence level affect the margin of error, or sampling interval, for survey results? In the following calculations, we determine margins of error for survey results using the same final sample size, or completed number of interviews, at different levels of confidence. We calculate each margin of error using a final sample size of 575. Here is the margin of error at a 90% confidence level:

$$1.65 \sqrt{\frac{(.5)(.5)}{575}}(100) = 3.44$$

Here is the margin of error at a 95% confidence level:

$$1.96\sqrt{\frac{(.5)(.5)}{575}}(100) = 4.09$$

Here is the margin of error at a 99% confidence level:

$$2.58\sqrt{\frac{(.5)(.5)}{575}}(100) = 5.38$$

These calculations reveal the trade-off between confidence level and the margin of error, or confidence interval, for a survey. If researchers want to increase their level of confidence or certainty as they make inferences from sample data to a population, they must be willing to accept a larger range of error in their survey's results. If researchers desire a smaller range of error, they must be willing to accept a lower confidence level when they make inferences.

## ISSUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

The formulas we have presented require various assumptions and raise some important issues. We have addressed many of these issues and assumptions in the preceding sections, but note that you may need to alter these formulas or disregard them completely, as the assumptions on which we have based these formulas change. One of the primary assumptions of all sample-size formulas, for example, concerns researchers' use of probability sampling methods. When researchers use nonprobability sampling methods, no sample-size formula will produce an accurate result because it is impossible for researchers to determine the representativeness of the sample.

One issue we have not addressed concerns the need to correct the formula according to a population's size. Researchers sometimes use sample-size formulas that contain something called *finite population correction*. Finite population correction is an adjustment factor that is part of a sample-size formula. Table 6.1 contains population-corrected final sample sizes for probability-based survey results with a  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error at a 95% confidence level. The appropriate sample size for a population of 1 million people is 384, the same sample size we calculated for a survey with a 95% confidence level and a  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error.

Is it necessary for researchers to correct for population size? Generally, most researchers have little need for population correction unless the size of the population is small and the sample is more than 5% of the total population (Czaja & Blair, 1996). In most sample surveys, population correction makes little difference in sample-size calculations and researchers simply

**TABLE 6.1**  
Population-Corrected Sample Sizes

<i>Population Size (N)</i>	<i>Sample Size (n)</i>	<i>Population Size (N)</i>	<i>Sample Size (n)</i>	<i>Population Size (N)</i>	<i>Sample Size (n)</i>
5	5	650	242	2,500	333
10	10	700	248	3,000	341
15	15	750	254	3,500	346
20	19	800	260	4,000	351
25	24	850	265	4,500	354
50	44	900	269	5,000	357
75	63	950	274	6,000	361
100	80	1,000	278	7,000	364
150	108	1,100	285	8,000	367
200	132	1,200	291	9,000	368
250	152	1,300	297	10,000	370
300	169	1,400	302	15,000	375
350	183	1,500	306	20,000	377
400	196	1,600	310	25,000	378
450	207	1,700	313	50,000	381
500	217	1,800	317	75,000	382
550	226	1,900	320	100,000	383
600	234	2,000	322	275,000+	384

Note: Figures reported are for probability-based survey results with a  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error at a 95% confidence level. Calculations are based on Cochran's (1977) formula for finite population correction. Further information is available in Kish (1965). According to this formula, even populations more than 1 million require a sample size of 384.

exclude a population correction factor because it is unnecessary. In fact, researchers would generally use the same sample size for a survey of registered voters in Chicago, a survey of registered voters in Illinois, or a survey of all registered voters in the entire United States! Although there are important exceptions, once a population reaches a certain size, sample sizes generally remain consistent. For this reason, and to keep our sample calculations simple, the sample size formula we presented does not include population correction.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Sampling is a powerful tool that helps practitioners obtain accurate information at a reasonable cost. Researchers' selection of a proper sampling method is as important as their selection of a proper research method to the success of a study. Even the most carefully planned and executed study will produce untrustworthy results if research managers use an improper sampling method. Although sampling can be complex, it is in readers' own best interest to learn all they can about the sample-selection procedures used

in a study. Few people would buy an automobile without first inspecting the vehicle they are purchasing, yet a surprising number of practitioners make research “purchases” without ever inspecting one of the most critical elements of their research project, the sampling procedures used in a study.

As demonstrated in this chapter, it is not necessary for practitioners to become sampling experts to understand many important issues related to sampling selection processes. It is necessary, however, for practitioners to understand basic distinctions in sampling methods and to work with researchers to ensure that the sample used in a study has the greatest chance of accurately representing the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of the population from which it is drawn.

# 7

## Making Research Decisions: Informal Research Methods

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- Personal Contacts
  - Professional Contacts, Experts, and Opinion Leaders
  - Advisory Committees or Boards
  - Field Reports
  - Community Forums/Group Meetings
  - Telephone Calls, Mail, and Electronic Mail
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  - Internet Research
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- 

In a sense, research simply is listening and fact finding, and practitioners most commonly rely on informal methods when engaged in simple fact finding (Cutlip et al., 2006). Such research often is critical to organizations as they monitor their internal and external environments, track public opinion concerning emerging issues, and address potential areas of conflict with target audience members before they become problems. Informal research methods often provide organizations with quick and

inexpensive ways to listen to critical publics such as employees, community members, consumer groups, and government regulators. Despite these potential benefits, practitioners take a sizable risk when they use informal research methods as the sole basis for communication campaign planning and problem solving. Because these methods lack the rigors of scientific research, they have a much greater likelihood of producing inaccurate results.

What makes a research method casual or informal? As noted in chapter 5, one of the reasons researchers consider a method informal is that it lacks a systematic process. When researchers use a casual process to collect information, the results lack objectivity. The second characteristic of informal research has to do with the samples practitioners use. In informal research, the sample may be too small or the responses of sample members may be too narrow to adequately reflect the views of everyone in a population, known as *generalizability*. This does not mean that informal research methods do not produce useful information. It is important, however, to understand the limitations of the information collected. Informal research methods generally are useful for exploring problems and for pretesting ideas and strategies. It is not advisable, however, for campaign managers to use them as the sole basis for program planning and evaluation. With this in mind, in this chapter we briefly present some of the casual methods most commonly used by communication campaign practitioners as they engage in the research and planning process.

### PERSONAL CONTACTS

The most obvious and common form of informal research involves talking to people. Practitioners can learn a surprising amount simply by asking people—ideally those who are members of a target audience or other relevant group—for their opinions and ideas. When political candidates or elected officials want to know what voters care about, for example, they may simply get out of their offices and ask people. Personal contact also might include personal experience in some cases. When practitioners experience the problems and benefits associated with a situation on a first-hand basis, it gives them valuable insights that they cannot gain by sitting in an office reading a report. Practitioners may find personal contacts especially useful when combined with scientific research methods. Contacts may help practitioners gain insight before they conduct a formal survey, for example, or help them understand survey findings that are surprising or counterintuitive. Although talking with people has serious limitations—a few people cannot possibly represent the range of opinions and behaviors that exist among all members of large publics—practitioners often gain valuable insights and ideas from their personal contacts.

### PROFESSIONAL CONTACTS, EXPERTS, AND OPINION LEADERS

Practitioners keep in regular contact with their peers, friends in related fields, and others who typically possess a wealth of useful experience and knowledge. These contacts may be especially valuable for practitioners, for example, when they are planning or implementing a new program for an organization. If an organization interested in holding a special event never has conducted one, it makes sense for managers to talk to contacts who specialize in event planning and promotion to take advantage of their knowledge and experience. Veteran practitioners are likely to have a wealth of practical advice and their own set of contacts that can benefit someone new to the field. In some cases, managers may want to hire consultants or firms who specialize in certain areas of public relations, either for a single project or on a continuing basis.

Managers also may benefit by talking to recognized opinion leaders or those who are experts in a relevant field. This group may include, for example, members of state or local government, editors and reporters, leaders of special-interest groups, teachers and educational leaders, leaders of community groups, union leaders, or trade association managers. Normally, the procedures used to collect information take the form of an informal, open-ended interview. Practitioners use the discussion to glean information and insights from a select group that is uniquely informed about a topic. The fact that these leaders are experts and opinion leaders, however, raises an important point to consider when using this type of research. These people, because of their position, affiliations, and knowledge, do not necessarily reflect the knowledge or opinions of the majority of citizens likely to make up a targeted public. In this case, experts' opinions and insights are potentially useful and even important, but are not generalizable to a more broad audience.

In addition, their opinions will be shaped by the organizations for which they work. In fact, some organizations such as unions, trade associations, and activist groups typically conduct research that they make available for little or no cost. In many instances, such research provides valuable information and insights to practitioners and their organizations. In other cases, however, organizations may conduct research, not to impartially learn the attitudes and opinions of the public but instead to gather support for existing organizational positions and official viewpoints. It is easy to create a research project that looks formal and scientific but contains untrustworthy results because project managers used leading questions or a purposefully selected sample. When you use research that a different organization has collected, it is important to learn as much as possible about the research method, including sample-selection procedures and the actual questionnaires or other instruments researchers used to collect data. This will ensure

that you are aware of the potential limitations of the information you are using. Even with potential limitations, such information may provide unique insights only possible through meeting with experts or opinion leaders or by examining the information they have at their disposal.

### **ADVISORY COMMITTEES OR BOARDS**

Advisory boards, standing committees, specially appointed panels, and similar bodies provide organizations with specific direction, help them plan and evaluate their programs and events, and help them identify and respond to feedback from the publics they serve. The nature and qualities of such groups differ widely according to their purposes. Public relations professionals often serve on the advisory board of local nonprofit organizations, for example, to help plan and direct their media relations and special events projects. Many local governmental bodies are advised by citizens committees as they address community issues such as urban planning, public transportation, or local safety issues. Other advisory groups may consist of employees, consumers, or students. In fact, any group an organization is serving or anyone who may benefit an organization through expertise or ability generally is qualified to serve in an advisory capacity.

Through their knowledge, experience, and insight, those who serve in an advisory capacity provide organizations with information critical for their successful operation. It is important for organizations to listen to advisory panel members and, when appropriate, work to incorporate their advice into their plans and actions. Members of advisory groups are quick to recognize when they are being used for appearances and when their advice has no effect on organizational behavior. In these cases, group members are likely to become a source of derision and potential conflict rather than a useful source of information and advice.

When organizational managers blindly follow the advice and information provided by advisory groups, however, they also may experience problems. The accuracy and validity of the advice provided by such groups provides a limited point of reference for understanding public opinion; it cannot possibly represent the range of attitudes and opinions held by all members of a target audience. With this in mind, managers must use information gathered from such groups as counsel only. Gathering information from advisory boards does not serve as a substitute for the scientific approaches organizations use to determine the attitudes and behaviors of target audience members.

### **FIELD REPORTS**

Many organizations have field representatives who might include, for example, district agents, regional directors, or sales and service people. Often, these people have more direct contact with important target audience

members than anyone else in an organization as they work their way through a district. The activity reports routinely filed by some types of field representatives may be a useful source of information for an organization, especially if agents make note of customers' questions. It is important that supervisors encourage their field agents to follow up on complaints and undertake related activities that help them to monitor and evaluate an organization and its standing among target audience members.

A manager's desire to learn the truth is critical to the successful use of field reports as a beneficial source of information. Field reports—in fact, any formal or informal research method—will not be useful to an organization seeking to justify its actions. The information provided by those in the field only is useful when supervisors are willing to hear the truth from their representatives. Having said this, it is important to recognize that the information provided by field representatives has limitations. These people do not talk to a random sample of targeted audience members and so their observations and suggestions are based on selective information. Input from the field, therefore, needs to be given appropriate weight, and organizational managers should use other forms of research to confirm or disconfirm this information when appropriate.

### COMMUNITY FORUMS/GROUP MEETINGS

Community relations specialists may attend community forums or other public meetings to better understand issues of concern to community citizens and the community members who are vocal and involved in an issue (Wilson, 1997). Organizational managers should not conceal their presence at such meetings but, in most cases, also should not be vocal. Managers who attend meetings to learn the views of others run the risk of gaining a wrong sense of opinion if they involve themselves in the process because they may temporarily influence or alienate those who might otherwise share their opinions. Instead, those who attend these meetings should report useful information back to an organization so that managers can consider the need for additional research and develop a strategic response to emerging issues or other situations. When conducted properly, this type of informal research helps practitioners monitor their internal or external environments, keep abreast of issues and opinions as they develop, and position the organization as both positive and negative developments occur.

### TELEPHONE CALLS, MAIL, AND ELECTRONIC MAIL

It is in the best interest of organizational managers to listen carefully when individuals, whether local community members, consumers, members of activist groups, or others, go out of their way to communicate with them. Many people who have questions, concerns, or grievances never make

the effort to communicate with an organization. They simply may sever their ties with the organization or, depending on their options, complain to their friends and colleagues as they maintain a frustrating relationship with an organization they dislike. In an era of greater consumer sophistication and public activism, individuals and groups are increasingly likely to express their anger in ways that attract media attention. Depending on the situation and organizations involved, such expressions may include, for example, public protests, meetings with legislators or government regulators, demonstrations at shareholders' meetings, letter-writing campaigns, or other efforts designed to pressure administrators to respond to issues and change organizational behavior.

Organizations can track phone calls, mail, and e-mail to learn about issues, gauge the level of individual concern, and help determine how to address these situations. Toll-free telephone numbers, in particular, are a relatively quick source of information for organizations and can be used to help track the concerns and issues expressed by important publics. Proctor & Gamble, for example, had been the target of vicious rumors that it was a proponent of Satanism. At the height of the crisis, the company handled more than 39,000 calls during a 3-month period (Cato, 1982). The calls not only were a valuable source of information for Proctor & Gamble but also gave the company the opportunity to respond individually to consumers' concerns. Similarly, the American Red Cross analyzed more than 1,700 telephone calls in response to the public's concerns about HIV and AIDS in its blood supply. The Red Cross not only answered individual questions but also determined the informational needs of targeted publics by analyzing a brief form that workers completed for each call. This simple analysis provided the organization with invaluable information, even helping administrators determine specific words to avoid when addressing questions concerning the transmission and prevention of the disease (Davids, 1987).

Organizations routinely use toll-free telephone numbers to establish, maintain, and strengthen relationships with consumers. Butterball Turkey, for example, established a Turkey Talk Line to answer consumers' questions about all aspects of turkey preparation, ranging from thawing to cooking to carving. Staffed by professionally trained home economists and nutritionists, the line runs 24 hours a day in November and December and receives 8,000 calls on Thanksgiving Day alone (Harris, 1998). Butterball also established a website in conjunction with the Turkey Talk Line that offers a complete array of product-related information concerning food preparation, storage, and serving. Consumers can even sign up for the *Turkey Lovers Newsletter* at the site. The Turkey Talk Line and website serve as important reminders to consumers about Butterball's expertise in turkey preparation and provide the company with important information about consumers' questions and interests.

Organizational employees can track both regular and e-mail in a manner similar to telephone calls. Once again, tracking mail may be a way for organizations to discover issues of consequence to important audiences and help them assess the need for formal organizational action concerning an issue or event. Most of the time, those who write or call an organization have problems or complaints. As with many informal methods of research, the sample is not representative of the range of opinions and attitudes that exist among all members of a target public because it is self-selected. At the same time, however, organizations that dismiss negative comments, questions, and criticism as the off-base complaints of a few disgruntled people risk making a serious error in judgment. It is best to take all potential issues seriously, recognizing that the few who speak often represent the opinions and attitudes of a much larger but silent group. In some cases, early warning signs produced through this type of informal information gathering indicate a clear need for additional research to further investigate an issue.

### LIBRARY RESEARCH

Almost any public library contains numerous resources of use to practitioners, including Internet access. In addition to books and other publications, many libraries contain comprehensive media collections that include, for example, years of national, state, and local newspapers and magazines. University libraries, and some state libraries if there is a state capital nearby, contain an almost overwhelming amount of material practitioners will find useful including reference material, special collections, archives, government documents, and similar resources. In fact, large universities typically have one primary library and several smaller, specialty libraries such as a business library or science library. In addition, many metropolitan areas contain special libraries or collections that are privately maintained by a business or association. These libraries contain a depth of material unavailable from other sources on specific topics such as advertising or broadcast history, some of which may be accessible online.

Practitioners looking for specific information or resources but not sure where to begin may find it useful to start with a reference librarian. These experts can locate a surprising number of directories, statistical facts and figures, studies, and other information, much of it now available online or in a digital format. If you are looking for specific information, the chances are excellent that there is a directory, abstract, book, or other resource that a reference librarian can locate, often in a short amount of time. Although the list of available reference materials would fill volumes, basic indexes include the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, which contains a listing of articles in numerous major magazines and journals categorized by topic; the *Business Periodicals Index*, which indexes articles in hundreds of

business publications, and the *New York Times Index* (also available online), which provides abstracts of news stories chronologically by subject. Other resources include, for example, the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, which also is available online or in a CD-ROM version and contains more than 1,000 pages of tables and data about aspects of the United States. It is beyond the scope of this text to list and explain the wealth of reference material available at many university libraries; however, this brief discussion provides some idea of the potential resources available.

One additional library resource that merits special attention because of its potential benefit to campaign planners and its ease of access is the Census Bureau data contained at many university libraries. The work of the Census Bureau results in one of the most abundant and beneficial sets of data available to practitioners, and it is free. The Census Bureau uses forms of different lengths when it conducts the census. Most citizens respond to a basic, short questionnaire that provides a small amount of information. A sizeable portion of citizens, however, fill out in-depth questionnaires that provide additional information of benefit to practitioners. The results indicate where people live and provide additional information, including demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, size, and disposition of their living unit, type of dwelling, and rental or value of their dwelling unit. This information is available for any individual or organization to use.

Campbell's Soup, for example, uses Census Bureau data to guide its development of products and refine its marketing strategies for existing products. In one case, marketers for the company surmised that Americans' eating patterns were changing and that breakfast no longer was a traditional group meal. They based their conclusion on Census Bureau data indicating that the number of two-income families was increasing, even though the number of members in a household were declining. The company launched a line of single-serving frozen breakfasts following additional research to confirm its conclusions. The product line quickly gained a sizable share of a rapidly expanding market. In another instance, the company used Census Bureau data indicating that the population was aging, along with other market research concerning the health interests of older people, to estimate the demand for reduced-salt soups. The result was a line of healthier soup products. In each of these cases, managers used Census Bureau data in conjunction with other market research to inform the company as it attempted to meet consumer needs and increase company success (Blankenship, Breen, & Dutka, 1998).

Census Bureau research results and a vast array of reference works are just some of the many library materials available. Other useful resources include trade and professional publications, archives, and other materials. Practitioners generally make the best use of these materials if they have as much information as possible when they begin an information search.

When practitioners are seeking specific information, they are likely to find an existing resource that contains the desired information, and both the library and online resources are excellent places to start the research process.

## INTERNET RESEARCH

The Internet, which began as a computer network to share information among multiple locations in the 1960s, has proven itself to be an irreplaceable tool in the collection and distribution of information. The Internet is an almost instantaneous source of an astounding amount of information and it allows organizations to communicate directly to potentially interested individuals with no media gatekeeper and few conventional geographic, political, or legal boundaries. The Internet allows organizations to conduct competitor research, place key documents online to promote themselves, build customer relationships, sell products and services, and more. Every business with a website is a potential publisher, and most organizations provide a wide range of promotional literature, product and service manuals, annual reports, position papers, speech texts, customer resources, and other materials online. Powerful search engines allow everyone from elementary school students to communication professionals to learn about and access these documents easily.

Organizations also may actively solicit information over the Internet by posting questionnaires or by using bulletin board systems and chat groups that allow people to “talk” online. In fact, this form of communication greatly broadens the range of experts that practitioners can contact for advice or other important information. Keep in mind, however, that not everyone engaged in online communication is listening or participating in an attempt to be helpful to an organization. The advice or other information received from an unknown online source may be from an experienced professional, a college freshman, or a fourth grader (Wilson, 1997).

This certainly is the case with web logs, or blogs, which are online diaries kept by individuals who write about nearly anything that interests them. Bloggers gained notoriety when they were among the first to expose problems with a CBS News report concerning the military service of President George W. Bush, and practitioners were quick to recognize the potential source of useful information they provide including insights into the thinking of target audience members and their responses to issues and trends. Although some companies have tried to create blogs for corporate personnel and use them as a way to reach audience members, the majority of blogs serve a more genuine, if not mundane, purpose. When dealing with online sources of information such as blogs, bulletin boards, and many online surveys, it is important for practitioners to remember that the opinions expressed in these formats are self-selected and in no

way represent all of the opinions and attitudes among members of a target audience. Even with these limitations, however, online communication vehicles provide a seemingly endless array of potentially important sources of information to practitioners.

There are several thousand online databases available to practitioners that provide access to a previously unimagined amount of information, including original research collected using both formal and informal methods. Numerous online directories help practitioners find database resources, such as SearchSystems.net, the largest directory of free public databases on the Internet with access to more than 32,400 free searchable public record databases, or DIRLINE, the National Library of Medicine's online database with more than 8,000 records about organizations, research resources, projects, and databases concerned with health and medicine. One of the most important and quickly growing uses of the Internet for public affairs managers is to engage in issue tracking and other forms of information retrieval using online subscription databases such as Lexis-Nexis, Dun & Bradstreet, and Dow Jones News/Retrieval. Practitioners access these databases to seek information in news and business publications, financial reports, consumer and market research, government records, broadcast transcripts, and other useful resources. Online database searches typically provide comprehensive results with speed and accuracy. Although such services can be costly, their use often is relatively cost-effective given the benefits of the information they provide.

In addition, the results of research conducted by governments, foundations, and educational organizations often is available online at little or no cost. Such research may provide important information about trends and major developments in fields as diverse as agriculture, education, and labor. In each of these cases, online technology has made it possible for practitioners to gather a wealth of information with amazing speed.

### CLIP FILES AND MEDIA TRACKING

Practitioners use media clips to follow and understand news coverage, to help evaluate communication campaign outcomes, and to attempt to get a sense of public opinion based on reporters' stories. In fact, it is safe to say that any organization that is in the news on a regular basis has some way to track media coverage, the results of which typically are organized into some sort of useful file system and analyzed. Although clip files do not serve all purposes well—as the Institute for Public Relations has noted, they measure “outputs” rather than “outcomes” such as changes in public opinion (Lindenmann, 1997)—they do allow organizations to track and analyze media coverage. When practitioners desire greater accuracy, precision, and reliability, they need to conduct a formal content analysis (discussed in chapter 9). Most organizational clip files and other forms

of media tracking fall far short of the demands of a formal content analysis, but still serve useful purposes.

### The Clip File

A clip file is a collection of media stories that specifically mention an organization, its competition, or other key words and issues about which an organization wants to learn. In terms of print media, for example, a clipping service is likely to clip from virtually all daily and weekly newspapers in any geographic region, including international regions. Other print media that may be covered include business and trade publications and consumer magazines. Once a service locates stories, it clips and tags them with appropriate information, typically including the name of the publication, its circulation, and the date and page number of the story. Clients or their agencies then can organize and analyze the clips in whatever format is most beneficial, as Figures 7.1 and 7.2 demonstrate. Services are available to monitor all types of media outlets. Companies such as BurrellesLuce Press Clipping or Bacon’s MediaSource, for example, offer comprehensive services for national and international media. Organizations can arrange for specialized services as well, such as same-day clipping to help organizations monitor breaking news or crises or broadcast monitoring to track video news release use.

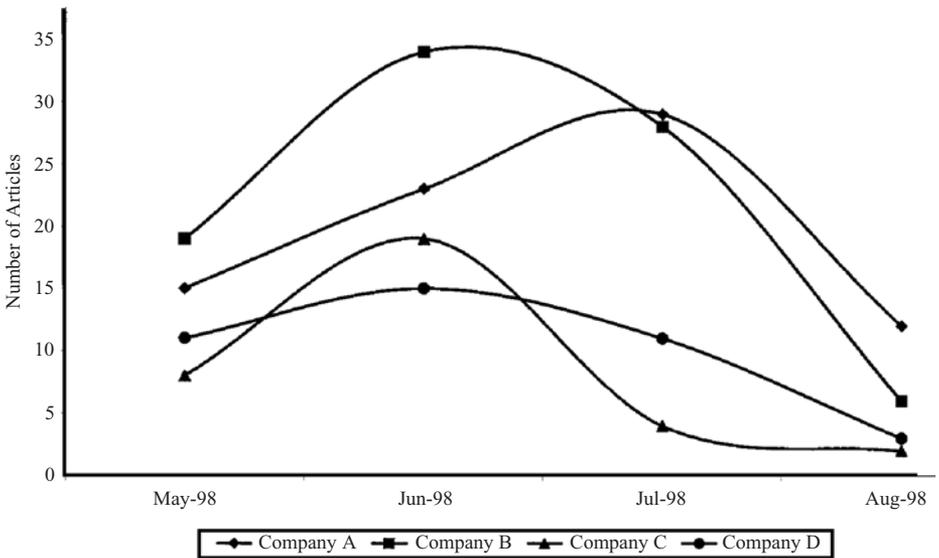


FIG. 7.1. Clippings organized by company and article frequency. Clipping frequency is one way for organizations to compare their media coverage with competitors’ media coverage. Courtesy of KVO Public Relations, formerly of Portland, Oregon.

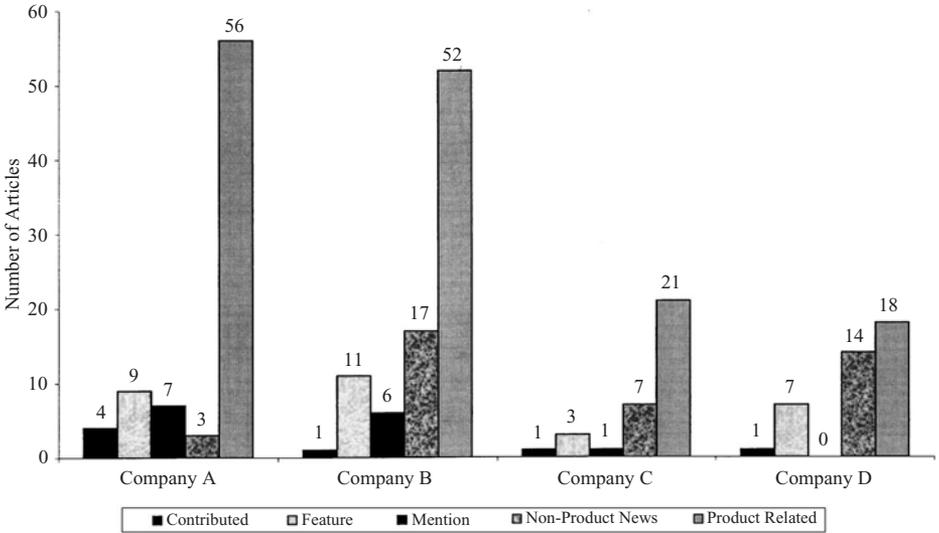


FIG. 7.2. Clippings organized by company and article type. Analysis of content in media coverage can provide organizations with information about types of stories that have attracted media attention. Courtesy of KVO Public Relations, formerly of Portland, Oregon.

Although differences exist among each of the services in terms of how they operate, a client generally provides a list of key words, terms, and topics that it wants its service to locate in specific media. The words and terms provided by an organization vary considerably but typically include its own name and the names of its products and services. Other information to track may include the names of competitors and their products and services, the names of senior management, or other important topics or individuals an organization wants to track. The client also may send its service information about its print or video news releases, public service announcement copy, or other material it expects will generate news coverage.

Practitioners can analyze clip file contents using various techniques. In many cases, they simply count the number of media clips a campaign produces and use their own judgment concerning the purpose of their campaign and the media’s treatment of a topic. Such an analysis may be useful for informal campaign reviews and exploratory decision making, but it lacks the quantitative specificity and accuracy necessary to truly determine a campaign’s effect on targeted audience, members’ opinions, attitudes, and behavior.

### Advertising Equivalency

In an attempt to quantify the value of media placement, many practitioners compare the results of their publicity efforts with equivalent advertising

costs. It is relatively common, for example, to compare the column space and broadcast time generated by a campaign with the “equivalent” cost for advertising placement had the space been purchased. This method of clip evaluation allows practitioners to claim a dollar amount for the media coverage their campaign generates. In some cases, practitioners increase, or more commonly decrease, the value of publicity placements using an agreed-upon formula. Practitioners do this because publicity placements commonly lack some of the benefits of advertising: in particular, a specific message delivered to a specific audience and timed according to a planned schedule. The result is that managers sometimes give editorial placements less value than advertising placements because they cannot control their contents and placement.

This issue raises a point of contention concerning the benefits of advertising versus the benefits of publicity, and it reveals some of the serious problems associated with claiming dollar amounts for publicity media placements. In reality, it is nearly impossible to compare advertising and publicity placements in terms of their relative value. How do you compare, for example, the value of a full-page print ad that appears in the middle of a publication with a front-page story that publicizes an organization’s good works in a community? In terms of different publicity placements, how do you determine the value of a story on the front page with a story placed in the middle of a section? Or, how do you compare the value of clips in different media—a narrowly targeted publication that reaches an identified target audience, for example, with general media placement that reaches the public broadly? Also, how do you compare the value of different editorial contexts: a story that is positive, for example, versus a story that is negative or mixed? These issues, and more, present practitioners with difficult obstacles when determining the relative value of advertising versus publicity and when determining the value of different publicity clips.

### Cost per Thousand

Another common method practitioners use to determine the value of publicity clips is based on the cost of reaching audience members. Advertisers, for example, commonly determine the most beneficial combination of media, programs, and schedules by evaluating and comparing the costs of different media and different media vehicles, as well as by considering the percentage of an audience that is part of a specific target audience for a campaign. One of the simplest means of comparing media costs is to compare the *cost per thousand* or CPM (*M* is the Roman numeral for 1,000) of different media. This figure tells media planners the cost of reaching 1,000 people in an audience. If a daily newspaper has 500,000 subscribers and charges \$7,000 for running a full-page ad, for example, the cost per thousand is \$14 ( $7,000 \div 500,000 \times 1,000$ ).

## Cost Efficiency

To determine the relative cost efficiency of different media, media planners use the same general formula but reduce the total audience figures to include only those audience members who specifically are targeted as part of a campaign. Using the previous example, if the campaign primarily is directed at males 18 to 34 years old and 30% of the newspaper's audience fits into that category, the circulation figure can be reduced to 30% of the total audience, or 150,000. The resulting cost efficiency figure is approximately \$47 ( $7,000 \div 150,000 \times 1,000$ ).

## Cost per Impression

Practitioners can use these same formulas to measure the relative value of publicity clips. Sometimes practitioners refer to publicity clips as *publicity impressions*. They can calculate the *cost per impression* (CPI) of publicity clips after they have completed a campaign and compare the results with advertising campaign costs or other campaign costs. In the same way, practitioners can calculate cost-efficiency measures of publicity impressions. CPM-type measures are difficult to use to compare the value of advertising versus publicity clips, primarily because CPM calculations are performed in the early stages of an advertising campaign and used for planning and forecasting, whereas a campaign must be over before practitioners can calculate final publicity impression costs because clips depend on media placement, which normally is not guaranteed in promotional campaigns.

More important, neither CPM nor CPI calculations measure message impact; they only measure message exposure. In fact, they are not even a true measure of message exposure but instead are a measure of the greatest potential message exposure. The exposure numbers they produce are useful in a relative sense but are likely to overestimate audience size.

## Limitations of Clip and Tracking Research

Although practitioners can use any of these methods to quantitatively evaluate publicity-clip placements, these methods are relatively unsophisticated and must not serve as the basis for determining message impact or campaign success. In most cases, formal research methods are necessary to evaluate a range of campaign outcomes from changes in the opinions and attitudes of target audience members to changes in individual behavior. This is not meant to suggest, however, that the use of clip files is not beneficial as a form of casual research. In fact, there are various potential improvements on the standard clip file and several valuable ways practitioners use such information.

Diabetes is a disease that receives a large amount of media coverage, for example, yet many people fail to understand how to resist the disease. Media tracking revealed that, although reporters were covering diabetes as a disease, they largely were ignoring the link between insulin resistance and cardiovascular disease. To address this issue, the American Heart Association joined with Takeda Pharmaceuticals North America and Eli Lilly to produce an award-winning campaign to help people learn about insulin resistance, better understand the link between diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and help reduce their risk of developing cardiovascular disease. The campaign included a major media relations effort designed to reach members of at-risk publics. Postcampaign media tracking indicated that the program received extensive media coverage, including coverage in key media targeted to members of minority groups who were a specific focus of the campaign. More important, 15,000 people enrolled in a program to receive free educational materials, double the number campaign organizers set as an objective (PRSA 2005b).

It is important to reiterate a key point in the use and interpretation of media tracking and clip files at this point. As a rule, this research reveals only the media's use of messages. Of course, it provides information concerning a targeted audience's potential exposure to messages, but clip files and tracking studies by themselves reveal nothing about message impact. Sometimes the results of media placements are obvious and no additional understanding is necessary. In fact, in many cases agencies do not conduct formal campaign evaluations because an organization or client believes it easily can identify the impact of a particular campaign. At other times, however, it is desirable to learn more about a message's impact on an audience's level of knowledge, attitudes, or behavioral outcomes. When this is the case, clip files and analyses of media-message placement tell practitioners nothing about these outcomes. In addition, campaign planners who claim success based on media placements as revealed by clipping services and tracking studies may be overstating the impact of their campaigns. Although clipping services and media tracking may have some value, practitioners are unwise when they attempt to determine public opinion and gather similar information based on media-message placement.

### **REAL-TIME RESPONSES TO MEDIA MESSAGES AND SURVEY QUESTIONS**

Technological advances have made it easy and relatively inexpensive for researchers to collect information instantaneously through the use of handheld dials that participants use to select answers to survey questions or indicate positive or negative reactions to media messages. Researchers can use these systems, with trade names such as Perception Analyzer, to administer a survey question to a group of people such as focus group

participants or trade show attendees, collect anonymous answers to the question immediately, and project participants' aggregated responses onto a screen. Once participants have had an opportunity to consider the result, a moderator can lead a group discussion about the responses and what they may or may not mean to participants.

In a twist on this process, researchers also can use these systems to collect participants' moment-by-moment, or real-time, responses to media including advertising, speeches, debates, and even entertainment programming. Managers and campaign planners then can use this information to help their organizations and clients develop more effective media messages and programming, for example, or determine key talking points for presentations and media interviews. This research tool, which we discuss in greater detail along with focus groups in chapter 8, has the potential to provide researchers with highly valuable information. At the same time, practitioners must use information provided by these services carefully. Sample size and selection procedures normally will prevent researchers from obtaining a probability-based sample so, as is the case with almost all informal research methods, research results will lack a high degree of external validity or projectability.

## IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

*In-depth interviewing*, sometimes called *intensive interviewing* or simply *depth interviewing*, is an open-ended interview technique in which researchers encourage respondents to discuss an issue or problem, or answer a question, at length and in great detail. This research method is based on the belief that individuals are in the best position to observe and understand their own attitudes and behavior (Broom & Dozier, 1990). This interview process provides a wealth of detailed information and is particularly useful for exploring attitudes and behaviors in an engaged and extended format.

Initially, an interview participant is given a question or asked to discuss a problem or topic. The remainder of the interview generally is dictated by the participant's responses or statements. Participants typically are free to explore the issue or question in any manner they desire, although an interviewer may have additional questions or topics to address as the interview progresses. Normally, the entire process allows an unstructured interview to unfold in which participants explore and explain their attitudes and opinions, motivations, values, experiences, feelings, emotions, and related information. The researcher encourages this probing interview process through active listening techniques, providing feedback as necessary or desired, and occasionally questioning participants regarding their responses to encourage deeper exploration. As rapport is established between an interviewer and a participant, the interview may

produce deeper, more meaningful findings, even on topics that may be considered too sensitive to address through other research methods.

Most intensive interviews are customized for each participant. Although the level of structure varies based on the purpose of the project and, sometimes, the ability of a participant to direct the interview, it is critical that researchers not influence participants' thought processes. Interviewees must explore and elaborate on their thoughts and feelings as they naturally occur, rather than attempting to condition their responses to what they perceive the researcher wants to learn. As Broom and Dozier (1990) noted, the strength of this research technique is that participants, not the researcher, drive the interview process. When participants structure the interview, it increases the chances that the interview will produce unanticipated responses or reveal latent issues or other unusual, but potentially useful, information.

In-depth interviews typically last from about an hour up to several hours. A particularly long interview is likely to fatigue both the interviewer and the interviewee, and it may be necessary to schedule more than one session in some instances. Because of the time required to conduct an in-depth interview, it is particularly difficult to schedule interviews, especially with professionals. In addition, participants typically are paid for their time. Payments, which range from \$100 to \$1,000 or more, normally are higher than payments provided to focus group participants (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

In-depth interviews offer several benefits as a research method. Perhaps the most important advantages are the wealth of detailed information they typically provide and the occasional surprise discovery of unanticipated but potentially beneficial information. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) suggested that intensive interviews provide more accurate information concerning sensitive issues than traditional survey techniques because of the rapport that develops between an interviewer and an interviewee.

In terms of disadvantages, sampling issues are a particular concern for researchers conducting in-depth interviews. The time and intensity required to conduct an interview commonly results in the use of small, nonprobability-based samples. The result is that it is difficult to generalize the findings of such interviews from a sample to a population with a high degree of confidence. For this reason, researchers should confirm or disconfirm potentially important findings discovered during in-depth interviews using a research method and accompanying sample that provide higher degrees of validity and reliability. Difficulty scheduling interviews also contributes to study length. Whereas telephone surveys may conclude data collection within a week, in-depth interviews may stretch over several weeks or even months (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

In addition, the unstructured nature of in-depth interviews leads to non-standard interview procedures and questions. This makes analysis and

interpretation of study results challenging, and it raises additional concerns regarding the reliability and validity of study findings. Nonstandard interviews also may add to study length because of problems researchers encounter when attempting to analyze and interpret study results. As a final note, the unstructured interview process and length of time it takes to complete an interview result in a high potential for interviewer bias to corrupt results. As rapport develops between an interviewer and an interviewee and they obtain a basic level of comfort with one another, the researcher may inadvertently communicate information that biases participants' responses. Interviewers require a great deal of training to avoid this problem, which also can contribute to study cost and length. Despite these limitations, researchers can use in-depth interviews to successfully gather information not readily available using other research methods.

### PANEL STUDIES

Panel studies are a type of longitudinal study that permit researchers to collect data over time. Panel studies allow researchers to examine changes within each sample member, typically by having the same participants complete questionnaires or participate in other forms of data collection over a specific length of time. This differs from surveys, which are cross-sectional in nature. This means that surveys provide an immediate picture of participants' opinions and attitudes as they currently exist, but they provide little information about how participants formed those attitudes or how they might change. A strength of panel studies is their ability to provide researchers with information concerning how participants' attitudes and behaviors change as they mature or in response to specific situations.

If researchers were interested in learning about young people's attitudes toward tobacco use and their responses to an anti-smoking campaign, for example, a properly conducted survey would provide them with information concerning participants' current attitudes and behaviors. Because children mature at such a rapid rate, however, their developmental differences would have a major impact on their attitudes and behaviors. One way researchers might examine how developmental differences influence adolescents' attitudes and behaviors is to track these changes over time. Researchers might choose to interview selected adolescents as 6th graders, 9th graders, and 12th graders, and even follow them through their first years in college or in a job. To test the effectiveness of an anti-tobacco campaign, researchers might expose one group of panel participants to specific anti-tobacco programs throughout their time in school in between data collection. For other panelists, they would simply measure their attitudes and behaviors without exposing them to any special programming

other than what they might receive through the media or in school. This project would provide researchers with a variety of useful information, allow them to develop some idea of the effectiveness of an anti-tobacco program, give them an idea of how participants' attitudes and behaviors change over time, and give them insights as to the role of developmental differences in adolescents' responses to health messages.

Today, some research organizations conduct sophisticated, large-scale consumer panel studies made possible through online participation. These studies can be based on sizeable samples and provide organizations that purchase the results with a variety of useful information that has been nearly impossible for organizations to collect in the past. Practitioners considering conducting a panel study or purchasing information based on panel research should be careful, however. Although information that panels provide may be extremely useful, the samples that organizations use for many panel research projects typically are not representative because they are based on a nonrandom selection process, are too small to be representative, or both. As a result, the results of panel research may suffer from low external validity, or generalizability. This problem typically is compounded by high rates of attrition, or mortality over time. That is, many panel members drop out of studies because they move, become busy, or simply lose interest. When panel studies suffer from large-scale attrition, practitioners need to consider the results they produce with caution because they most likely lack representation. As an additional note, although panel studies do allow researchers to examine change over time, they normally do not allow researchers to make causal determinations because they do not eliminate all possible causes of an effect. For these reasons, we treat panel studies as an informal research method and, despite the clear benefits of the method, encourage practitioners to consider the results carefully.

## Q METHODOLOGY

*Q methodology* is a general term Stephenson (1953) coined to describe a research method and related ideas used to understand individuals' attitudes. This method of research combines an intensive, individual method of data collection with quantitative data analysis. Q methodology requires research participants to sort large numbers of opinion statements (called *Q-sorting*) and to place them in groups along a continuum. The continuum contains anchors such as "most like me" to "most unlike me." Researchers then assign numerical values to the statements based on their location within the continuum to statistically analyze the results.

For the most part, Q-sorting is a sophisticated way of rank-ordering statements—although other objects also can be Q-sorted—and assigning numbers to the rankings for statistical analysis (Kerlinger, 1973). In public relations, a Q-sort might work like this: An organizations prints a set of

verbal statements concerning its image on cards and gives them to research participants. Researchers then ask participants to sort the cards into separate piles based on the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each statement. The result is a rank order of piles of cards placed on a continuum from “most approve” to “least approve,” with varying degrees of approval and disapproval between each extreme. Researchers assign the cards in each pile a number based on their location. The cards in the highest, “most approve” category, for example, might be assigned a 10. The cards in the next highest “most approve” category might be assigned a 9, and so on. The cards placed in the lowest, “least approve” category would receive a 0. The resulting Q-sort would contain a rank ordering of statements that reveal the participant’s beliefs about the organization.

The number of cards used in a Q distribution ranges from fewer than 50 to 140. For statistical reliability, a good range for most projects is from 60 to 90 statements (Kerlinger, 1973). The sorting instructions provide a guide for sorting Q-sample statements or other items, and researchers write them according to the purpose of the study (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Researchers may ask participants to sort opinion or personality statements on a “most approve” to “least approve” continuum, or to describe the characteristics of an ideal political candidate or organization on a “most important” to “least important” continuum. Q-sort instructions also can concern fictional or hypothetical circumstances.

Finally, participants may sort statements according to their perceptions. In a political study, for example, participants may sort statements using “what you believe is most like a liberal” and “what you believe is most unlike a liberal” for continuum anchors (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). There are many additional anchors and instructions that researchers can use in Q-sorts, and the flexibility of the method in this regard provides a wealth of opportunities for researchers.

Sample-selection procedures are a particular challenge in Q-method research. It is difficult to draw a large, representative sample, particularly given the time requirements and intensive nature of the data-collection process (Kerlinger, 1973). The result is that researchers typically draw small, convenience samples (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). The use of small, nonprobability-based samples makes it difficult to generalize study results from a sample to a population with confidence. Although some might suggest the use of nonrandom samples is a limitation of minor consequence, the reality is that both theoretical and descriptive research require testing on samples of sufficient size—ideally drawn using a probability-based procedure—to produce trustworthy results.

Q methodology is potentially useful but also controversial. The research technique is flexible and may be particularly useful when researchers are exploring the opinions and attitudes of important target audience members. In addition, researchers can statistically analyze study results, and

Q methodology provides an objective way to identify and intensively study individuals' opinions and attitudes. Nevertheless, the use of small, convenience samples greatly hinders the external validity of study results. There simply is no way to confidently generalize results from the sample of study participants to the population they supposedly represent. In addition, there may be complex statistical concerns about the assumptions of statistical tests applied to Q-sort results. In particular, Q-sorts may violate a key assumption concerning the independence of participant responses and, as a result, this creates challenges for researchers analyzing study results. These imitations are the primary reasons we describe Q methodology as an informal research method.

In addition to these concerns, some critics complain that the sheer magnitude of sorting 60 to 100 statements or more is beyond the ability of most participants, and a high number of categories requires participants to make numerous fine distinctions among items (Kerlinger, 1973). It is clear that, although Q-sorts provide a potentially rich and useful method of exploring the opinions and attitudes of key target audience members, they have limitations that practitioners must carefully consider when interpreting study results. It is particularly important to consider the use of follow-up research, such as a survey that uses a large, probability-based sample, to understand the results of a Q-sort as they relate to a larger population (Broom & Dozier, 1990).

## FINAL THOUGHTS

It is important for readers to remember that informal research methods typically suffer from several limitations that make them difficult to use with confidence. This, in fact, is the reason researchers consider them informal and casual. This does not mean that practitioners should never use informal research methods. In fact, practitioners regularly use informal research methods, typically more frequently than they use formal research methods. Because of their limitations, however, practitioners must interpret the results of informal research carefully and understand the limitations of the methods they are using. Considering the advice of selected members of a target audience, for example, makes sense in most situations, and such input can be an invaluable help when engaging in research and planning. At the same time, however, the prudent practitioner will consider this information for what it is—the opinions of a few people—instead of giving it the full weight of a scientifically conducted, formal opinion poll.

What does this mean for public relations practitioners? When possible, practitioners should use informal research to supplement formal research methods rather than to replace them. This provides practitioners with a variety of research results they can use to support the planning

process. Unfortunately, practitioners may rely on informal research exclusively because of limited budgets and a lack of time. In these situations, it is wise to take every precaution in interpreting and using research results correctly. No research method is infallible, but managers should use special care when interpreting research results produced through informal methods.

# 8

## Making Research Decisions: The Focus Group

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  - Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups
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- 

The focus group long has been a mainstay of public relations and marketing research, but it remains a controversial method for research and message testing. Practitioners often tell horror stories about focus groups that provided misleading information for a campaign that later failed. Nevertheless, the method recently has begun to gain more respect as a valid research tool, rather than a cheap and dirty alternative to so-called real research.

A recent proliferation of scholarly and how-to books and articles has made it possible for more practitioners to use the tool more effectively and

wisely. Although focus groups still have limitations, careful application of the method can provide indispensable guidance available from no other tool. As John Palshaw of Palshaw Measurement, Inc., cautioned (1990), however, focus groups are designed to generate ideas, not evaluate them.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FOCUS GROUP

A focus group is a semistructured, group interview analyzed using qualitative methods, which means researchers interpret responses instead of trying to count them. Focus groups explore the attitudes, opinions, behaviors, beliefs, and recommendations of carefully selected groups. Focused discussions, led by a moderator, usually include 6 to 12 participants and take place over 1 to 3 hours. Sessions attempt to define problems, gather reaction to proposed solutions to problems, and explore feelings and reasons behind differences that exist within the group or between the group and the organization.

Organizations typically use focus groups to obtain feedback during product or service development, to test messages for product or service introductions, to guide decisions about packaging design and promotional messages, to determine appropriate types of outlets and target publics for products or messages, to gauge public reaction to issue positions, and to explore opinions concerning company performance and community citizenship. Message testing explores participants' perceptions of the accuracy, clarity, and relevance of a message, as well as the credibility of the source.

More specialized uses of focus groups also exist. Focus groups can be used to gain a better understanding of groups whose perspectives are poorly understood by an organization. This can help an organization respond more effectively to the group's concerns. Focus groups also can help an organization explore its strengths and weaknesses relative to other organizations. In addition, focus groups can be used for brainstorming purposes, to develop strategies for solving a problem instead of simply testing strategies already under development. Focus groups can help an organization gain insight into complex behaviors and conditional opinions, for which survey questionnaires could provide conflicting or seemingly definite information. As a result, focus groups often are used as a supplement to survey research.

Group dynamics in a focus group can be used to reach consensus on an idea, such as the most credible source for a message or the best location for an event. Finally, focus groups can be used to pretest and refine survey instruments, particularly when likely responses to a question are unknown, such as the biggest barriers to a customer's use of a proposed product or service.

Instead of using questionnaires, researchers use protocols to guide focus group discussions. Protocols range from rough outlines to carefully

constructed moderators' guides. Pre-session questionnaires can be used for screening. In addition, focus groups often use visual aids such as story boards, mock-ups, or other sample materials for pretesting. Whereas surveys try to take a dispassionate, outsider's perspective to obtain the most objective information about a targeted population from a representative group, focus groups try to work more from inside the target group, exploring individuals' perspectives in depth to gain a deeper understanding of their decision-making processes. Surveys, in other words, try to avoid bias; focus groups try to explore and understand it.

### ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups should not be viewed as alternatives to survey research, as the two methods have different strengths and weaknesses. The focus group offers characteristics that give it a uniquely useful role in problem definition and message testing. Because focus groups are socially oriented, for example, they make it possible to uncover information about an issue that would not come out in individual interviews or in surveys. People initially may not recall using a product or service but may be reminded of a relevant situation as a result of another participant's observations during the focused discussion. In addition, the focused discussion makes it possible to probe positive or negative responses in depth. Because people can explain what they mean and moderators can probe for clarification, focus groups provide good face validity. In other words, managers can be confident that they are interpreting what people said in ways consistent with what they meant. This can be more difficult in a survey, for which individuals must check a box even if the question seems vague or the possible response categories do not reflect their views perfectly.

Focus groups also provide quick, relatively inexpensive results to guide a program that requires fast implementation. Although overnight survey services are available, they can be expensive and make it difficult to develop a tailored survey instrument that maximizes the relevance of findings obtained. Political campaigns, meanwhile, can use focus groups to try out possible responses to a competitor's political advertisement in time to air a response within a day or two.

Another advantage of focus groups is their flexibility. Literacy, for example, is not needed for a focus group whereas it is required for a written questionnaire. People without land-based telephones or with caller ID may never respond to a telephone survey but may participate in a focus group if recruited properly. In addition, focus groups can be held in different locations, even in a park. This makes it easier to recruit from populations that may be unable or unwilling to travel to a research facility.

Focus groups have drawbacks that limit their usefulness and increase the risk of obtaining misleading information that can compromise

communication program effectiveness. For example, although the group dynamics of a focus group make it possible for information to come out that might not be uncovered through individual interviews, group dynamics also make it more difficult to control the direction and tenor of discussions. A carefully trained moderator is essential to draw the full range of opinions out of focus group participants and to prevent individuals from dominating the group. Groups vary depending on the characteristics of the participants, the timing, and the environment, which makes their reliability questionable. They also can be difficult to assemble because individuals from targeted populations may be busy, resistant, or forgetful.

Because of these limitations, focus groups should never be used in confrontational situations, for statistical projections, if the unique dynamics of social interaction are unnecessary for information gathering, if confidentiality cannot be assured, or if procedures such as sampling or questioning are driven by client bias rather than by researcher design.

The usefulness of a focused discussion depends on the willingness of participants to share their perspectives freely and honestly. As a result, focus groups must take place in a comfortable, nonthreatening environment. The composition of an appropriate setting requires attention to the makeup of the group itself, as well as the surroundings in which the discussion takes place. A poorly constructed environment can hamper discussion or make it difficult to ascertain true opinions. A focus group of parents, for example, may mask differences in perspective between mothers and fathers. Misleading information obtained from a restricted discussion can doom a campaign.

### SELECTING AND RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

People tend to feel most comfortable when they are with others like themselves. As a result, focus group participants usually are selected to be *homogeneous*, which means similar in certain characteristics. These characteristics depend on the issue explored by the group. For example, a discussion of a college's responsiveness to student financial aid issues could mix male and female students because they are likely to share similar problems regarding funding their education. On the other hand, a discussion of date rape is less productive if the group includes both men and women. Because women often are the victims of date rape, this may make both the men and the women uncomfortable talking about it in front of each other. As a result, separate focus groups can take place to separately explore the beliefs and feelings of men and women about date rape. Similarly, a discussion of workplace issues may need to probe the views of managerial personnel and secretarial personnel separately because employees may not feel comfortable speaking freely in front of their supervisors.

The most productive focus groups recruit participants who are similar but who do not already know each other. If they know each other, interpersonal dynamics such as power roles already have been established and can make open discussion and discovery more difficult. This becomes important in focused discussions that must mix participants with different perspectives, such as employees and supervisors, to explore the dynamics between them. This type of situation can work only if the participants feel they can be open with one another and only if the discussion can take place in a constructive, civil way. In other words, if participants need to include employees and supervisors, they should not include employees and their own supervisors.

Focus group participants often are recruited with respect to homogeneity in demographic characteristics such as age, income, educational level, product usage patterns, or group membership. Screening tests ascertain these characteristics to ensure that participants qualify for inclusion in the study. Such tests can be performed via telephone during recruitment or in the outer lobby on arrival. Several separate focus groups may be required to obtain reactions from different target publics.

Because the focus group method is qualitative not quantitative, it is not necessary to hold a certain number of focus groups to ensure a corresponding degree of reliability. Whereas a survey uses probability sampling to provide reliable results within a 95% level of confidence, focus groups are inherently biased by design. As a result, organizations typically rely on a combination of intuition, budgetary restrictions, and time constraints to determine the number of focus groups that will be held. If time and budget allow, focus groups should continue until all vital target publics have been represented or until the information obtained seems redundant; that is, little new information emerges from additional focus groups. In reality, however, organizations rarely have the time or budget to hold more than two to four focus groups.

Cost varies widely for focus groups. Hiring a professional firm to run a focus group can require \$3,000 to \$5,000, but organizations can run their own focus groups if they prepare carefully. The cost of using existing staff and volunteer participants can be as low as the cost of popcorn or pizza and soft drinks. According to Morgan and Krueger (1998), fees for professional moderators range from about \$75 to \$300 per hour, or \$750 to \$1,500 and upward on a per diem or per group basis.

Focus group participants usually are paid for their time. The going rate depends on the type of sample recruited. Researchers undertaking focus groups of children may rely on prizes or free products as compensation. Focus groups of adults usually pay around \$35 to \$50 apiece. Recruitment of expert participants such as executives, physicians, or other professionals may require significantly greater payment, perhaps \$300 apiece.

It is necessary to recruit more participants than are actually needed for the group. In fact, researchers usually recruit twice the number needed to allow for no-shows and individuals who for some reason become ineligible. When recruiting from special populations, in particular, unforeseen circumstances can prevent attendance. People also tend to forget, so preparation requires a multistep process of recruitment, acknowledgment, and mail/email and telephone reminders.

When time is tight, on-the-spot recruitment of focus group participants can take place in a shopping mall that has a market-research facility on the premises. Usually, however, focus group recruitment takes place 1 to 2 weeks before the session. Respondents can be recruited using different methods, but often they are contacted by telephone. Following the initial contact, recruits should receive a written confirmation of the invitation to participate that also serves as a reminder. Reminder phone calls the day or two before the session also helps to boost attendance. If possible, attendees should provide contact numbers and email addresses upon recruitment so that they can be reached at home or at work.

The location of focus group facilities can help or hurt recruitment. The facility should be easy to find, such as in a shopping mall; be relatively close to participants' homes or work places; and have plenty of safe parking available. When recruiting parents, researchers also may find it necessary to provide child care. Proper facilities and staffing must be provided to gain the confidence of parents.

Timing can make a difference for focus group success. Most focus groups take place in the evening and avoid weekends or holidays. Other times, such as the lunch hour, may be appropriate for special cases. If two groups are planned for a single evening, the first typically begins at 6:00 p.m. and the second at 8:15 p.m.

## THE FOCUS GROUP SETTING

Participants tend to speak more freely in an informal setting. Conference rooms are better than classrooms, circular seating is better than lecture-style seating, coffee tables are better than conference tables, and comfortable chairs or sofas are better than office or classroom chairs. Some organizations rent hotel suites for focus group discussions, whereas others use rooms specifically built for focus group research. Focus group facilities typically include a two-way mirror, behind which clients can sit to observe the discussion as it unfolds without disturbing the participants. This mirror looks like a window on the observers' side but looks like a mirror on the participants' side. Facilities also may include a buffet table or another area for refreshments because snacks and beverages tend to promote informality. Snacks need to be simple, however, so that the participants pay more attention to the discussion than to their food. Food can

range from a complete meal such as sandwiches to a small snack such as popcorn.

To aid analysis and for later review by the client, discussions are recorded unobtrusively on audiotape, videotape, or both. Participants are advised of all data-collection and observation procedures. Taping and observation are never done in secret or without the participants' consent. Participants also must be informed if their anonymity may not be assured, such as by their appearance on videotape. Often, for the discussion, participants wear name tags but provide only their first names. Sometimes they go by pseudonyms for additional privacy protection. At no time should participants be identified by name in focus group transcripts or reports.

### STAFFING

Focus groups generally require a team effort. Besides staff for the planning and recruitment phases of the focus group, the interview itself usually requires several staff members. In addition to the moderator, who leads the discussion, the event requires at least one other staff member to serve as coordinator. The coordinator (or coordinators) welcome and screen participants; handle honoraria; guide participants to the refreshments and make sure refreshments are available; check and run equipment; bring extra batteries, duct tape, and other supplies; and interact with the client. In addition, the coordinator or another staff member takes prolific notes during the session. This is necessary because (a) transcription equipment can and does break down and human error with equipment does happen; (b) some people may speak too softly for their comments to register on an audiotape; (c) it may be difficult to identify the source of a comment, particularly if several participants speak at once; and (d) the note taker can provide an initial real-time analysis of themes emerging from the discussion. The note taker may develop the final report in collaboration with the moderator.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MODERATOR

The focus group moderator is the key to an effective discussion. The moderator must be able to lead discussion, providing both structure and flexibility to keep the discussion on track but allow participants to pursue issues in depth. Because the moderator must be skilled in group dynamics, some people specialize in focus group leadership and can command an expert's salary to do so.

The moderator must display an air of authority while establishing an atmosphere of warmth and trust so that participants feel free to speak their minds. The moderator strives to keep the structure of the questioning strategy from becoming too obvious because that could detract from the

informality that increases the likelihood of open discussion. In addition, the moderator must treat all participants with equal respect, staying neutral while encouraging all points of view. Moderators never offer their own personal opinions, and they also must avoid using words such as *excellent*, *great*, *wonderful*, or *right*, which signal approval of a particular point of view. The moderator also must be able to prevent any member of the group from dominating and must be able to draw out hesitant members.

Effective moderators memorize their topic outlines or protocols so that they can pay full attention to the unfolding dynamics of the group. An abbreviated checklist can help them keep on track. The best focus groups direct the discussion themselves to a great extent, instead of having their discussion directed by a highly structured questionnaire. As a result, moderators must be ready to make adjustments, including the sudden addition or deletion of questions by the client, who can convey messages to the moderator during the focus group by way of an ear microphone or notes. The moderator may need to modify a questioning strategy that fails with a particular group or pursue an unexpected discovery that, although unplanned, can provide useful information. Morgan and Krueger (1998) recommended the use of *5-second pause* and *probe* strategies to elicit more information from respondents (see also Krueger, 1994). The 5-second pause can prompt others to add their comments to one just made. The probe responds to an information-poor comment such as "I agree" with a rejoinder such as "Would you explain further?" or "Can you give an example of what you mean?"

Moderators have a sharp but subtle awareness of their own body language so that they can provide nonverbal encouragement without biasing responses. For example, leaning forward toward a participant can encourage the individual to go more deeply into a point, but too much head nodding gives the appearance of endorsement that can make another participant hesitant to express disagreement. Similarly, eye contact can provide encouragement to a member who seems withdrawn, whereas a lack of eye contact can help prevent another individual from dominating discussion by denying that individual the attention desired. Eye contact can seem aggressive to individuals who are shy or who come from cultural backgrounds in which direct eye contact is considered confrontational, which means that the moderator needs to understand and act sensitively toward cultural differences.

Even the moderator's dress can make a difference. Although a blue suit, white shirt, and tie can provide an air of authority, for example, it also can give the impression of formality and leadership that some may find offensive or threatening. The moderator needs to both lead the group and fit in with group. As a result, there may be times when the ethnic background, gender, and age of the moderator emerge as important characteristics. Participants often assume the moderator is an employee of the

organization under discussion, which can hinder or bias responses. The moderator needs to do everything possible to communicate neutrality.

### DEALING WITH DIFFICULT GROUP MEMBERS

Moderators must anticipate the possibility of losing control of a group. Usually, dominant or disruptive participants can be managed using body language and occasional comments. For example, a moderator can hold up a hand as a stop sign to one participant and signal to another, "Let's hear from you now." A moderator also can suggest that participants answer a question one by one, going around the room, rather than allowing the most assertive respondents to speak out first every time. Seating charts, along with place cards on the table, can help moderators refer to people by name. If a group becomes too wild or conflictual or if individuals become too antagonistic or disrespectful, a 5-minute break can help calm everyone down. In extreme cases, a particularly disruptive individual can be asked to leave during the break. The individual is thanked for participating and told that he or she was needed for the first part of the discussion but that the second part of the discussion will be different and not everyone will be needed. It is important to be firm but polite.

### PROTOCOL DESIGN

The focus group protocol, or outline, is designed to provide a subtle structure to the discussion. Unlike surveys, which rely primarily on closed-ended questions, focus group questions must be open ended. They include a combination of uncued questions and more specific, cued questions (probes) that can help spark responses if discussion lags. Uncued questions are ideal ("What impressions do you have of the XYZ organization currently?") because they give participants the most freedom to introduce new ideas. Cued questions provide more context or probe for more depth ("What about the news coverage of the incident bothered you the most?"). The protocol provides just enough structure to help the moderator stay on track. It also progresses from general questions to more focused questions so that participants have a chance to get comfortable before confronting the most difficult issues.

Closed-ended questions also can be useful if the focus group is being used to explore reasons for answers that might appear on a survey. Analysts, however, must be careful not to extrapolate from focus group participants' answers to closed-ended questions. Clients often appreciate both types of information but can be tempted to make more out of focus group "surveys" than is appropriate.

The subtleties of question construction can have a great effect on the type of discussion that takes place and the value of the information shared.

Question phrasings need to avoid using *why* because that term can seem confrontational and can stifle open responses. Instead, questions should rely on *how* and *what* phrasing. For example, instead of asking respondents, “Why do you dislike this poster?” ask, “What did you dislike about this poster?” Questions also need to avoid dichotomous phrasing (“Did you enjoy the event?”) because participants may answer the question literally or ambiguously (“Yes,” or “Pretty much”) without providing any context (“What do you remember about the event?”). Sometimes, however, a yes/no question can prod a reticent group into a simple answer that can be explored in depth through follow-up probes. Krueger (1994) also recommended opening with more positive questions and saving negative questions for later so that the overall tone of the group remains constructive, acknowledging both sides of an issue.

Two especially useful question strategies recommended by Krueger include *sentence completion* and *conceptual mapping*. Sentence completion questions can be introduced verbally by the moderator or handed out in writing. Participants are asked to complete sentences that request information on their motivations or feelings (“When I first heard about the change in policy I thought . . .”), often in writing, using notepads and pencils provided for the purpose. This enables the moderator to obtain the initial views of every member even if they change their minds during discussion or feel hesitant to speak out. Conceptual mapping asks participants to consider how an organization or product relates to other, similar organizations or products. For example, participants could be asked to “map” political candidates such that the most similar are closest together. The discussion then focuses on what characteristics each participant used to establish similarity, such as trustworthiness, conservatism, or experience. Conceptual mapping requires that participants have some prior impressions or knowledge on which to base their judgments.

According to Krueger (1994), the focus group protocol has five general sections of main questions, to which cued probes can be added to ensure discussion flows smoothly.

1. *The opening question.* This question functions as a warm-up or ice breaker and is intended to demonstrate to participants that they have characteristics in common with one another. It should be able to be answered quickly by the participants, requiring only 10 to 20 seconds from each. Krueger advised that these questions should be factual (“How many children do you have, and how old are they?”) rather than attitude- or opinion-based (“What is your favorite flavor of ice cream?”). Questions need to avoid requiring disclosures of occupational status because that can create power differentials that hinder group dynamics.

2. *Introduction questions.* These questions set the agenda for the discussion by addressing the topic of interest in a general way (“What was your

first impression of...?" or "What comes to mind when you think about...?"). These questions are designed to get participants talking about their experiences relevant to the issue but are not intended to provide much information for later analysis. During this period, participants should begin to feel comfortable talking about the topic with each other.

3. *Transition questions.* These questions begin to take participants into the topic more deeply so that they become aware of how others view the topic ("What events have you attended at the Coliseum this year?"). They provide a link between the introductory questions and the key questions that follow.

4. *Key questions.* These two to five questions form the heart of the focus group inquiry and directly address the issues of concern to the client. They can focus on message testing, conceptual mapping, idea generation, or whatever information is of interest to the client. These questions usually are written first, with the remaining questions built around them.

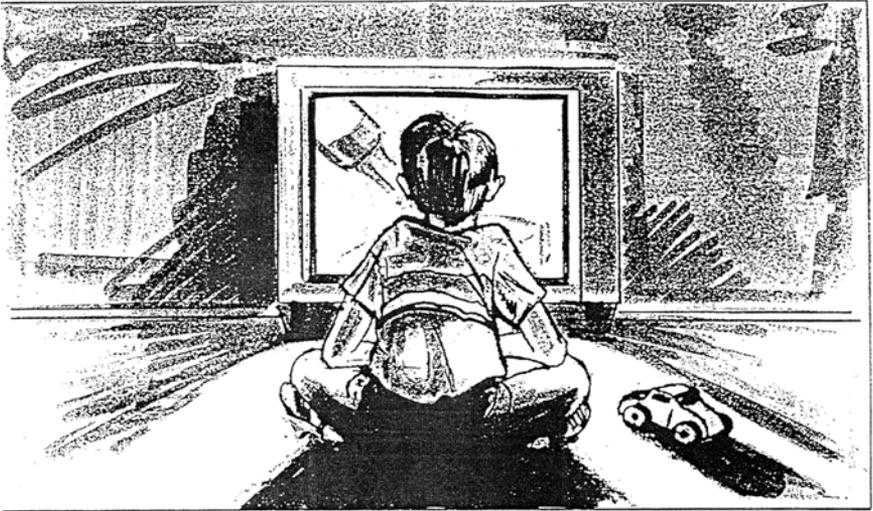
5. *Ending questions.* These questions bring closure to the discussion to make sure all viewpoints have been represented and to confirm the moderator's interpretation of overall themes expressed. These can take the form of suggestions, recommendations for the client. Respondents are asked to reflect on the comments made throughout the session. These questions take the form of a final reaction ("All things considered..."), which often is asked of each member one by one; a summary confirmation, in which the moderator gives a 2- to 3-minute overview of the discussion followed by a request for verification ("Is this an adequate summary?"); and a final, standardized question ending the discussion following another overview of the study ("Have we missed anything?"). Krueger (1994) recommended leaving 10 minutes for responses to this question, especially if the focus group is early in a series. The answers to this question can give direction to future focused discussions.

## MESSAGE AND IDEA TESTING

When using focus groups to try out campaign strategies, it is important to investigate a full range of possibilities and not just the one or two favorites of the client or agency. The manager does not want to limit the ability of the focus group to produce surprises or upset assumptions. Given the crowded marketplace of ideas that exists in the media and everyday environment, breaking through the morass presents communication programs with a challenging task. This challenge can tempt message producers to "push the envelope," going for the most shocking message or the most colorful message or the funniest message. As chapter 14 explains, however, messages need to accomplish more than getting the target audience's attention. They also need to be perceived as relevant, memorable,

motivating, accurate, and credible. Extremes may or may not be necessary to break through the clutter, and extremes may help or may backfire once people begin to pay attention to the message. As a result, it is useful to test strategies ranging from the tame to the outrageous. The messages tested for the “Talk to Your Kids” campaign, shown in Figures 8.1 through 8.3, provide such a range.

Managers must keep in mind that the target publics for messages may include gatekeepers as well as the ultimate audience. The Washington State Department of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, for example, wanted to run a media campaign exhorting parents of children between 3 and 10 years of age to talk with their children about alcohol. Because funds for paid placements were limited, they needed the cooperation of the Washington State Association of Broadcasters. As a result, they tested messages with parents and with broadcasters, who had different concerns. Because many broadcasters accept advertising for beer, they shied away from messages



## Make sure the most important messages about alcohol come from you.

FIG. 8.1. Rough of “Boy and TV” alcohol campaign advertisement. This image of a boy in front of a television was changed to a girl in print advertisements after feedback from focus group participants suggested that the image was too stereotypical. The image of the boy was still used for a television ad. Image courtesy of the Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Department of Social and Health Services, Washington State.



## **Make sure the most important message about alcohol comes from you.**

Whether you know it or not, your children are already receiving powerful messages about alcohol.

Just by watching TV, they repeatedly see adults drinking to have fun. Drinking to relax. Even drinking to look attractive and be popular.

Parents can't control all the information young children receive about this drug. However, you can prepare them for the peer pressure and onslaught of pro-alcohol messages to come.

Call 1-800-662-9111, or write for our free guide, "Talking To Your Kids About Alcohol."

And do it soon. Because they've already started listening.



Washington State Substance Abuse Coalition  
Talking to Your Kids About Alcohol Brochure  
12729 N.E. 20th, Suite 18, Bellevue, WA 98005

FIG. 8.2. Final version of boy and television advertisement. This image of a girl in front of a television was created in response to focus group comments. Image courtesy of the Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Department of Social and Health Services, Washington State.



## This wouldn't look so innocent if you had heard Lisa offer Mr. Bear another scotch and soda.

FIG. 8.3. Rough of “Tea Party” alcohol campaign advertisement. The words “scotch and soda” in the headline accompanying this image of a girl having a tea party with her teddy bear was changed to “glass of wine” after focus group respondents suggested that the hard liquor phrase was too extreme. A second focus group reacted positively to the “glass of wine” version, and the revised image was accepted for use in television ads for the campaign. Image courtesy of the Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Department of Social and Health Services, Washington State.

that seemed especially strident. They were supportive of the campaign, however, and ended up providing nearly \$100,000 of free exposure for the final announcements during prime viewing hours.

### NEW OPTIONS MADE POSSIBLE BY TECHNOLOGY

Focus group designers now can use hand-held response dials or keypads to gather information from participants. The use of these devices makes it possible to gather responses from every participant, even when some seem reticent about speaking their minds publicly. In addition, the electronic collection of data enables the moderator to display results from the group for discussion purposes. For example, after showing a series of five rough-cut video messages, the moderator can show the group how many participants chose each option as a “favorite” or “least favorite” choice. The moderator also can ask participants to indicate how believable each message seems and then display the results to explore what made the messages seem more or less credible.

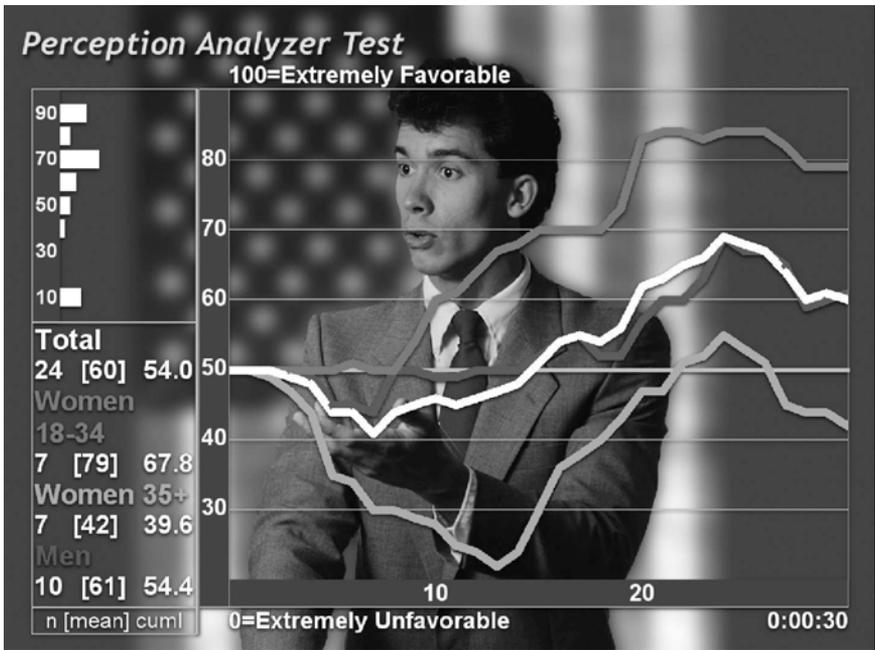


FIG. 8.4. Sample overlay of moment-by-moment responses to a politician's speech. Courtesy of MSInteractive, Portland, Oregon.

Some systems, such as the Perception Analyzer produced by MSInteractive, enable researchers to explore real-time responses to messages on a second-by-second basis. Respondents dial a higher number when they like what they see or hear and dial a lower number when they do not like what they see or hear. As shown in Figure 8.4, the resulting graph can be overlaid on the video to show where the message gained or lost audience support. Respondents can discuss the results or researchers can analyze the graph on their own. Although managers must carefully avoid the temptation to rely on the quantitative data produced by this technique, it can help to focus and motivate discussion among group members. Several dozen adolescents in a recent project exploring their perceptions of anti-tobacco public service announcements, for example, unanimously praised the system. Later groups with college students garnered similar enthusiasm.

### RUNNING THE GROUP

The moderator begins by welcoming the participants, introducing the topic of discussion and purpose of the meeting very generally, and laying out the ground rules for discussion. The explanation of the study needs to be truthful but vague to avoid leading participants. The strategy of the focus

group method, after all, is to let the group steer discussion to the extent possible. Ground rules usually cover the following points:

1. Participants should speak up so everyone can hear what they have to say.
2. Only one person should speak at a time to make sure comments are not missed.
3. Each person should say what they think and not what they think others want to hear. Honest responses are important, and respondents have been asked to participate because their true opinions are valued.
4. Negative comments are at least as useful as positive ones. (“If we thought we were doing a perfect job already, we would not be holding this focus group. We need to know how we can do things better.”)
5. No right or wrong answers exist to the questions asked.

Moderators sometimes find it helpful to have participants jot down their answers to questions before opening a discussion. Participants also can be asked to deposit note cards into labeled boxes on the table so that the raw responses can be analyzed later and compared with opinions shared only during the discussion. This technique effectively reveals minority opinions.

### ANALYZING THE RESULTS

Analysis of qualitative data can range from an intuitive overview to rigorous scrutiny using methods accepted by scholars. A variety of computer programs for content analysis of qualitative data exist, including freeware programs such as VBPro (Miller, 2000). Time pressure usually prevents the most detailed analysis, but some scientific principles apply even to the most succinct report of results. Krueger (1994) and others recommended the following principles:

1. *Be systematic.* Establish a procedure ahead of time that makes it possible to disconfirm assumptions and hypotheses. The procedure can be as simple as searching for themes and using at least two direct quotes to illustrate each point. Every interpretation needs to consider whether alternative explanations might provide an equally valid analysis.
2. *Be verifiable.* Another person should arrive at similar conclusions using similar methods. Keep in mind that focus groups can provide information that a client will find threatening or disheartening. To convince a determined or defensive client that a change in policy or strategy is necessary, the evidence must be compelling.
3. *Be focused.* Keep in mind the original reasons for holding the focus group and look for information that relates to those points. Focus

groups that go on for 3 hours can produce transcripts with well more than 50 pages. Researchers must have a strategy ready to reduce the voluminous mass of data into meaningful chunks of information.

4. *Be practical.* Perform only the level of analysis that makes sense for the client and the situation. A complete transcript, for example, may not be necessary if the issues explored were fairly simple, and it may take time away from other planning activities during a tight implementation deadline.
5. *Be immediate.* During delays, the focus group observers' impressions may fade, compromising their ability to analyze the data. All observers must make notes during the focus group and immediately afterward to identify themes and direct quotes that seem important. These observations can be confirmed, fleshed out, and supplemented during later analysis but often provide the most valid and vivid conclusions.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

The focus group is probably the method most often employed by public relations professionals. It also is probably the method most often misused, which likely contributes to client and managerial skepticism of its value. The focus group offers tremendous benefits to the practitioner aiming to pretest strategies or understand communication processes in some depth. As long as the communication manager respects the limitations of the focus group, it can be an indispensable tool for responsive and effective communication program planning.

# 9

## Making Research Decisions: Formal Research Methods

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### Chapter Contents

- A Brief Review of the Characteristics of Formal, Scientific Research
  - Survey Research Overview
  - Experiments
  - Content Analysis
  - Final Thoughts
- 

Public relations practitioners need more sophisticated research methods as their informational needs evolve from simple fact finding and casual analysis to a more sophisticated understanding of the opinions, attitudes, and motivations of target audience members. In a perfect world, researchers follow a formal, scientific process; use a representative sample of participants that produces results that are high in generalizability; and produce objective results instead of subjective results that reflect their opinions. Public relations practitioners use formal research to measure audiences' precampaign attitudes, opinions, and behaviors for benchmarking purposes; to understand and explain audience motivations and behaviors; to understand media message effectiveness and measure postcampaign effects; and to measure and describe important media characteristics. Ultimately, the results of such research help public relations practitioners and their organizations to successfully understand target audiences and measure campaign outcomes, increasing the likelihood of program success.

Even though all formal research methods could apply to some aspect of public relations, practitioners do not use all scientific research methods

regularly. In addition, communication managers more commonly use informal research methods than formal research methods, despite the increase in sophistication, generalizability, known accuracy, and reliability that formal research methods can provide. For this reason, this chapter introduces readers to a range of formal research methods including surveys, experiments, and content analyses. Detailed discussions of survey research methods and related topics follow in later chapters because surveys are the most commonly applied formal research method in public relations.

### A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FORMAL, SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Understanding research methods increases our knowledge of how to learn about the social world (Adler & Clark, 1999), including the world of our target audiences. The ways we learn about the world of our targeted audiences have benefits and limitations. Because there is a detailed discussion of the characteristics of formal and informal research in chapters 5 and 6, we offer only a brief review here.

Although public relations research can greatly increase the likelihood of program success, poorly conducted research that misinforms campaign planners can have a strong, negative effect on program performance. In the same way, research conducted properly but misapplied to a public relations problem or campaign can have a negative effect on campaign effectiveness. This might be the case, for example, when a focus group (informal research) is used to gauge audience attitudes and opinions in the design phase of a campaign. If the results of the focus group are inaccurate, the campaign will fail to inform and motivate its target audience members. Most practitioners do not need to be formal research experts, but it helps to know and understand basic research issues to use research effectively, as Figure 9.1 demonstrates.

In general, formal, scientific research is *empirical* in nature (derived from the Greek word for “experience”) or concerned with the world that can be experienced and measured in a precise manner (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). As a result, formal research methods produce results that are *objective* and values free. This means the research results do not unduly reflect the biases of researchers or the attitudes and opinions of a few selected individuals but instead reflect events, facts, and behaviors as they exist or naturally occur in a population or group.

Next, formal research methods require that research team members follow a systematic set of procedures to provide for the uniform collection of data. This process helps ensure that researchers treat each participant in a study the same way and that they measure all participants’ responses in the same fashion. Scientific research results also rely on a representative

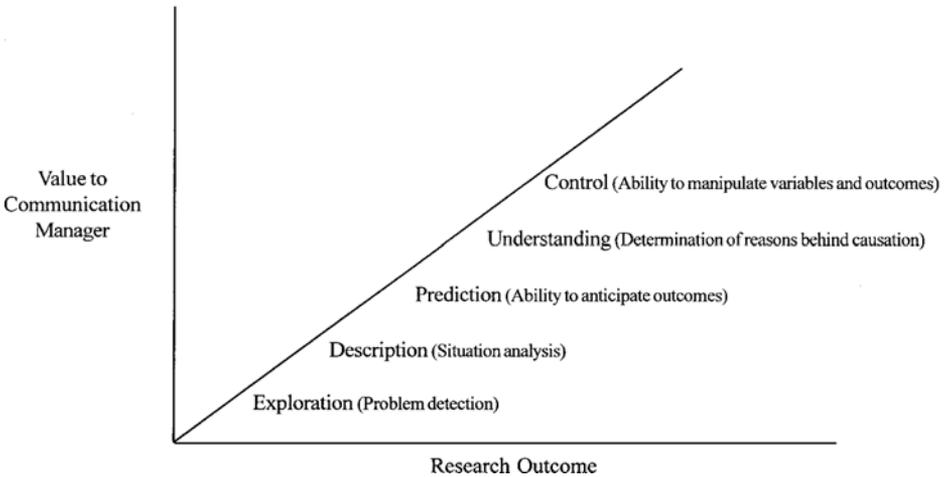


FIG. 9.1. The goals of science. Maximum control of a situation requires the ability to predict what will happen, understand why things happen, and control what will happen. At a lesser level, explorations of a problem and descriptions of constraints and opportunities also are useful outcomes of research and are prerequisites for strategic planning.

sample to the greatest extent possible and, to the greatest extent possible, researchers understand the limitations of samples that are not completely representative. When researchers use probability-based sampling methods and draw a sample of appropriate size (discussed in chapter 6), they help ensure that the behaviors and attitudes of sample members reliably depict the range of behaviors and attitudes found in a population. In reality, no sample is perfectly representative; however, samples collected using probability methods are more trustworthy than other samples. This type of trustworthiness is called *external validity* or projectability. That is, survey results can be projected from a sample to a population with a certain level of confidence (which we can calculate mathematically).

Finally, researchers should be able to reproduce the results of formal research projects. This is known as *replication*. If the results of a project were unique to a single study, we would conclude they may be biased, perhaps because of faulty sampling procedures or problems with the data-collection process. When study results are replicable, they provide accurate information for the population under study. Social scientists generally consider a research project formal to the extent that it incorporates the characteristics of objectivity, systematic collection of data, representative samples, and replicable results into its design. The following discussion of scientific research methods is designed to introduce you to the range of possibilities available for research projects. We begin with a review of survey research, followed by a discussion of experimental research designs, and media

content analyses. Because of the wide application of survey research to public relations, more specific aspects of survey research design are discussed in chapter 10.

## SURVEY RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Survey research is vital to organizations in a variety of different fields including all levels of government, political organizations, mass media corporations, educational institutions, entertainment conglomerates, and other product manufacturers and service providers. In public relations, practitioners use survey research to measure people's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior by asking them questions. Organizations commonly turn to survey research when they want to understand their target audience members' awareness, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, behavioral motivations, media use, and other information necessary for successful campaign implementation or evaluation.

Campaign managers may use research at all stages of the program planning, implementation, and evaluation process. Public relations practitioners most commonly use survey research in the planning and evaluation phases of a campaign. In the campaign planning phase, *precampaign* surveys help practitioners establish target audience benchmarks so that they can set campaign goals. If one of the purposes of a campaign is to increase target audience members' awareness of a client's product, for example, practitioners must establish current audience awareness levels so that they can set appropriate goals and objectives. In this way, *precampaign* research findings provide a point of reference for campaign evaluation.

Practitioners use *postcampaign* research as part of the campaign evaluation process to help them determine whether a campaign has met its goals and related purposes. If the purpose of a campaign is to increase target audience members' awareness of a client's product by 10%, a *postcampaign* survey is one of the ways practitioners can determine whether the campaign has been successful. Simply put, campaign outcomes are determined by comparing *postcampaign* research results with *precampaign* benchmarks. *Postcampaign* research also may serve as *between campaign* research. That is, many organizations simply transition from one or more existing campaigns to new campaigns without stopping to conduct new research at every point between campaigns. In these cases, *postcampaign* research may serve some *precampaign* research purposes when additional programs are in the planning or early implementation stages.

Sometimes surveys and other forms of research are conducted during a campaign to provide intermediate campaign evaluations. Such monitoring helps campaign managers determine whether a campaign is on course. In such a case, they use research results to monitor campaign progress and to make corrections in campaign strategies and tactics.

In addition, surveys generally fall into one of two broad categories. On the one hand, managers use *descriptive surveys* to document current circumstances and conditions and to generally describe what exists in a population. For more than 50 years, for example, the Bureau of the Census has conducted a monthly survey of about 50,000 households for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This survey, called the *Current Population Survey*, provides government policy makers and legislators with employment information as they plan and evaluate government programs. Similarly, political candidates, special interest groups, and media organizations regularly survey voters to determine the level of support for a particular candidate or policy initiative or to understand and predict election outcomes. Many applied public relations research projects are descriptive in nature.

Practitioners rely on *analytical surveys*, on the other hand, to explain why certain circumstances, attitudes, and behaviors exist among members of a specific population. This type of survey research is likely to involve advanced forms of statistical analysis to test hypotheses concerning relationships among a group of variables under study. Academic researchers, for example, commonly study the relationship between exposure to negative political advertising and attitudes about politics and political participation. In many cases, surveys serve both descriptive and analytical purposes. In each instance, researchers follow formal procedures and use a systematic process to ensure that data collected are objective, reliable, and accurate.

Regardless of the purpose of a survey, most survey research projects generally follow the same planning process shown in Figure 9.2. Initially, researchers determine the objectives of the research project. Next, researchers design the study. During this phase of a survey they determine the population and sampling procedures they will use in the project, select a specific interview method, and design and pretest the survey instrument or questionnaire. Then, the research team collects, edits, and codes data. Finally, researchers analyze and interpret results.

## Survey Planning

Initially, the most important aspect of survey research planning involves identification of the purpose of a research project. This normally involves identifying a research problem and the potential hypotheses and/or research questions a project will address. Campaign practitioners often give this aspect of a research project relatively brief attention because they are busy and the purpose of many projects appear obvious. As discussed in chapter 4, however, the most successful research projects are those that have a high degree of direction. Surveys that lack direction often fail to live up to their potential as a planning or evaluation tool. For this reason,

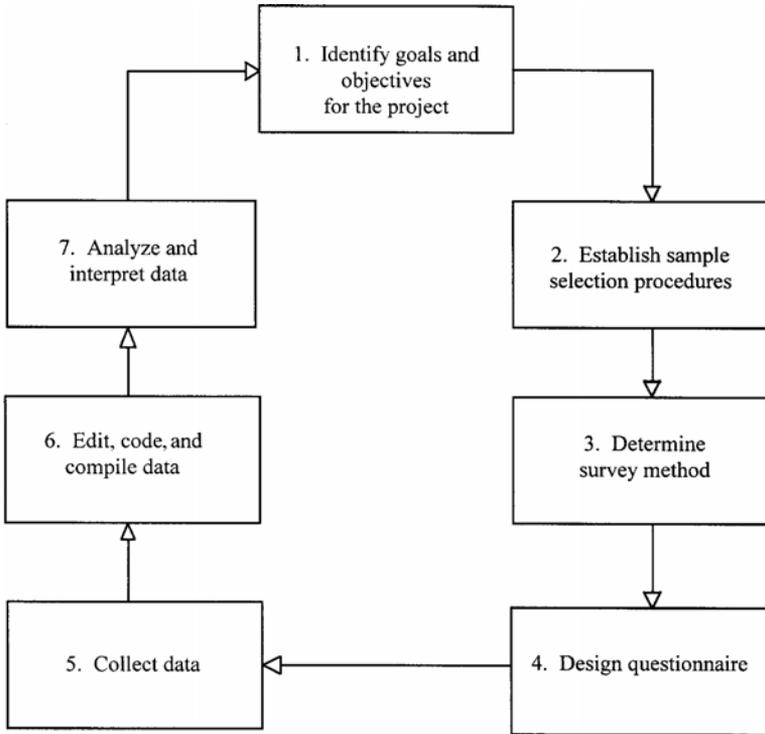


FIG. 9.2. The survey planning process. To help ensure project success, researchers generally follow these steps in a systematic manner when planning and implementing a survey.

although applied research projects typically use research questions, practitioners may find it useful to think about expected research outcomes as a way to formalize their expectations concerning the results of a research project.

### Survey Sampling

Sample selection procedures depend on survey objectives. As discussed in chapter 6, sampling procedures range from convenient to complex. They also vary in terms of their trustworthiness. A scientific technique called *probability sampling* usually provides an accurate and reliable understanding of the characteristics of a population when researchers conduct sampling methods correctly. For this reason, the use of proper sampling methods is one of the most critical aspects of any research project and an especially important characteristic of scientific survey research.

## Determining the Data-Collection Method

The four primary means of collecting survey data are personal interviews, mail surveys, telephone surveys, and electronic surveys conducted via the Internet. In addition, researchers sometimes combine methods to conduct a mixed-mode survey. Selecting a proper data-collection method is critical to the success of a research project, and each method of data collection has its own strengths and weaknesses. There is no single best survey research method, but there almost always is a best survey research method to use given the limitations and requirements of a research project.

The choices at first may seem overwhelming. If the purpose of a project is to interview business professionals working in telecommunications industries, for example, telephone and interpersonal interviewing probably are poor choices because participants will be too busy to respond to a researcher's request for information. Yet respondents can fill out web-based or mail surveys at their convenience, which means that these methods show more promise with this group of respondents. In addition, these survey methods tend to cost less than other survey methods. If time is a major concern, however, regular mail surveys are not the best research method because it takes longer to complete a project. Completion times for mail surveys typically range from a few weeks to several weeks or more if multiple mailings are necessary. Given time concerns, an e-mail survey may be a viable option for data collection. Yet there may be significant sampling limitations in the use of such a survey, making it less appealing. There are still other research methods to consider, each with their own benefits and limitations.

Research professionals must look at a variety of important issues when considering data-collection methods. Selecting an appropriate survey method is crucial to the successful completion of a research project. This topic is addressed in greater detail in chapter 10.

## Questionnaire Design

Proper questionnaire design contributes significantly to the trustworthiness of survey results. Good survey questions, when combined with appropriate data-collection methods, produce accurate responses. Poor survey questions or inappropriate data-collection methods produce untrustworthy results that can misinform public relations managers.

Poorly designed questionnaires often bias participants' responses. In this case, researchers are no longer measuring respondents' true attitudes, opinions, and behaviors, but instead are measuring manufactured participant responses they have created through a poorly designed questionnaire. Normally, practitioners cannot use these responses because they do not

represent the true responses of research participants or target publics. A public relations campaign based on erroneous information is likely to fail. Erroneous information is likely to worsen situations in which practitioners use research as the basis for problem solving.

Several questionnaire characteristics that seem relatively unimportant can bias participant responses, including question wording, question response categories, and question order. In addition, when interviews are administered by another person either face to face or over the telephone, interviewers can bias survey results as they interact with participants. This topic is an important part of communication research, and chapter 11 addresses questionnaire design issues in greater detail.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection typically is the next step in the survey research process, and in many respects it is the beginning of the final phase of a research project. By this point, the researcher typically has made the most difficult project-related decisions, and well-designed research projects tend to run relatively smoothly (Robinson, 1969). Practitioners' levels of involvement in data collection range from managing all aspects of data collection to leaving all aspects of data collection to a research project manager or field service provider. Although practitioners may leave projects in the hands of capable managers with relative confidence, generally it is in their best interest to at least monitor data collection. Occasionally, practitioners need to make important decisions concerning data collection. When survey response rates appear unusually low or respondents do not understand a question, for example, practitioners should be involved in determining the best solution. A minimum level of practitioner involvement is warranted during data collection to help ensure that the knowledge gathered will best serve the purposes of the project. As a result, chapter 12 presents information to aid in data collection and analysis.

### **Editing and Coding**

Editing and coding are the processes research team members use to translate the information collected in questionnaires into a form suitable for statistical analysis. When researchers use a computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) or web-based system, editing may be unnecessary. When interviewers record participants' responses using other methods, however, researchers typically must check questionnaires to eliminate or correct incomplete or unintelligible answers. Questionnaires should be edited by a supervisor during data collection to detect errors and provide rapid feedback to their source (often an interviewer who is not paying careful attention). Research team members must pay careful attention to

missing answers and inconsistencies that perhaps reveal a lack of uniformity among interviewers; interviewer differences in wording questions or recording participant responses introduces error into survey results.

Editing and coding may be necessary when a questionnaire has open-ended responses or other data that need categorization. Editing is best conducted by a few trained supervisors working with a fixed set of rules. Using these rules, editors typically place participants' responses into mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories to facilitate data analysis. Often, unseen intricacies are involved in this type of editing, requiring a high degree of consistency among editors to generate reliable results.

Coding is the process of preparing the data for analysis. The essential task in coding is to translate survey data into numerical form so that analysts can access and analyze the results. Each survey project should have a code book, which is a column-by-column explanation of the responses and their corresponding code numbers. Coding questionnaires consists of reading each question, referring to the code book, and assigning the appropriate code for the respondent's answers. Researchers then analyze these data. Chapter 12 provides additional information concerning editing and coding participant responses.

## **Analysis and Interpretation**

Statistical analysis and interpretation are the next steps in survey research. Although a thorough discussion of statistical procedures is beyond the scope of this text, a brief review of common analytical techniques appears in chapter 12.

## **Survey Critique**

Survey research is an interesting and effective means of studying public relations issues and publics. A primary advantage of survey research is that research team members often can complete telephone interviews, electronic interviews, and some forms of personal interviews relatively quickly. Cost may be an advantage, as well. The cost of most survey research is reasonable considering the amount of information practitioners receive. In addition, different methods of data collection provide for cost control through the selection and implementation of more or less expensive survey methods. The relatively low cost and ease of implementation make survey research attractive to communication managers.

Nevertheless, no research method is foolproof and survey research has its limitations. First, survey research cannot provide direct evidence of causation. When evaluating campaign outcomes, for example, survey research cannot allow practitioners to determine with certainty that a campaign has had a particular effect on target audience members' attitudes and

behaviors. In addition, researchers occasionally attempt to specify causes when research results do not support such conclusions. If a research project revealed that boating accidents increase as ice cream sales increase, for example, we might be tempted to conclude that ice cream is a culprit in boating accidents. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Both ice cream sales and boating accidents simply increase as the weather warms up, and they clearly are not related in terms of a cause-and-effect outcome. Although this example is absurd, researchers need to beware of making conclusions that are equally, if perhaps more subtly, absurd using research data that do not support their conclusions.

Other weaknesses of survey research are specific to the data-collection method researchers use in a project. Large personal interview surveys may be costly, for example, requiring the training of field supervisors and interviewers, as well as covering travel expenses and other costs associated with interviews. Similarly, mail surveys typically take longer than other survey research methods to complete because of the time associated with mailing the questionnaires to a sample and receiving responses back from participants. It is important to know the specific strengths and weaknesses associated with each method of data collection, and these are discussed in detail in chapter 10.

Other concerns associated with survey research apply in some way to all survey data-collection methods. Sometimes respondents are inaccurate in the answers they provide, for example, whether in a direct interview or on a mailed questionnaire. Inaccurate responses introduce error into survey results. There are a variety of reasons for this problem. Sometimes, respondents simply do not remember information about themselves or their activities. They may simply make up a response rather than admit they do not know an answer. This also is a problem when respondents lack knowledge regarding the subject of a public affairs question, for example, but answer the question anyway.

Respondents also may provide incorrect answers in an attempt to find favor with interviewers, and some survey questions include responses that are more socially desirable than alternative choices. In other instances, participants may simply choose to deceive researchers by providing incorrect answers to questions. Survey results concerning complex subjects are further complicated by respondents who find it difficult to identify and explain their true feelings, especially using simple numerical scales. As a result, practitioners should consider the potential drawbacks to the successful completion of a survey before they start a research project.

Despite the weaknesses of survey research, its benefits outweigh its drawbacks for many research projects. Survey research is particularly useful for description and association, a necessity given the often exploratory and descriptive nature of many applied projects. In addition, a carefully prepared questionnaire contributes to results that are reliable and accurate.

Telephone and electronic surveys, in particular, enable researchers to collect a large amount of data within a short time at a reasonable cost. Given the needs of data collection and the time and budget constraints placed on many research projects, survey research often is an excellent choice for practitioners. This is why communication campaign managers use it so often.

## EXPERIMENTS

In the most basic sense, an *experiment* involves taking an action and observing the consequences of that action (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). In a sense, experiments are a natural part of public relations because in most cases, practitioners take action of one sort or another and then gauge the effect of that action (in experimental language this is called a *treatment*) on a targeted audience members' attitudes or behavior. Although various study designs exist, generally an experiment requires at least one group of participants to receive a treatment (such as exposure to part of a public relations campaign). Researchers then can determine the effect of that treatment by comparing participants' before-treatment responses with their after-treatment responses on a series of questions designed to measure their opinions or attitudes, for example (Broom & Dozier, 1990).

Experimental research designs may make important contributions to the public relations campaign design and evaluation because they allow practitioners to isolate campaign variables and control them. This high degree of control allows researchers to use experimental designs to systematically examine variables that may or may not influence target audience members. If campaign planners want to determine voter responses to potential campaign advertisements, for example, they might measure the attitudes and projected voting behavior of a relatively small group of voters (perhaps 40 or 50), expose them to the advertising stimuli, then measure their attitudes and projected voting behavior again. If no other variables were introduced in the process, the changes that took place from the first measurement to the second measurement would be due to the advertising.

Practitioners rarely use true experiments in applied settings. Given the previous political advertising example, campaign managers are more likely to conduct a focus group and get participant feedback on different advertising executions (called *copytesting* in advertising) than to conduct an experiment. As already discussed, informal research methods such as focus groups normally produce results that are low in external validity and reliability. The result is that practitioners might use incorrect research results as the basis for making important campaign decisions.

Controlled experiments, on the other hand, are the most powerful means of determining campaign effects because researchers can use them to determine causation. This is the primary benefit of experiments. From a

scientific perspective, three conditions are necessary to determine causation. First, the cause (variable A) must precede the effect (variable B) in time. Second, a change in the first variable (A) must produce a change in the second variable (B). This is called *concomitant variation*, and the idea is that a change in one variable is accompanied by a change in another variable. Third, researchers must control or eliminate all other possible causes of an effect in an experiment. This ensures that the relationship between the variables is not caused by a third variable. By using experiments, researchers can examine and understand variable relationships under uncontaminated conditions. This allows them to develop greater insight into variable relationships, such as the effects of political advertisements on voters.

Researchers use systematic procedures when they conduct experiments. Initially, they select the setting for the experiment. Next, they design or plan the project. In this phase researchers decide how to measure and manipulate variables, select a specific study design, and develop and pretest the materials they will use in the experiment. Finally, researchers collect, analyze, and interpret data.

## Settings

The two main settings in which researchers conduct experiments are research laboratories or similar facilities used for research purposes and the field. A laboratory setting is advantageous because it provides researchers with the ability to control almost all aspects of an experiment. By controlling outside influences, researchers can make exact determinations regarding the nature of the relationships among the variables they are studying. Generally, the more controlled and precise an experiment is, the less error that is present in research results. By controlling the conditions under which an experiment occurs, researchers can reduce the risk of contamination from unwanted sources.

The artificial nature of research laboratories or similar facilities have disadvantages. Isolated research environments that are highly controlled to exclude potential interference are different from most real-life circumstances. In measuring voters' responses to televised political advertisements, for example, it would probably be better to test voters at home where they normally watch television. This environment is a natural setting that is likely to contain all the distractions and other influences people encounter when they watch television. It is in this environment that we most likely would measure participants' most natural responses. Unfortunately, these distractions and other influences also are likely to change research results. This contamination makes the determination of causation nearly impossible. Practitioners have to balance these advantages and disadvantages when choosing a study design. When researchers pull people

out of their natural settings and place them in controlled environments such as laboratories, participants also may react differently to the materials used in the experiment (televised political ads in this example) because this is not their normal viewing environment. Ultimately, the controlled artificiality of research settings tends to produce results high in internal validity (when a measure precisely reflects the concept that it is intended to measure) but low in external validity (the generalizability of results from a sample to a population).

Researchers conduct field experiments in the environment in which participants' behaviors naturally occur. In other words, the field is the environment in which participants live, work, and relax. The dynamics and interactions of small groups, for example, may be studied at places where small groups of people naturally congregate such as common meeting areas in college dormitories. Field experiments tend to have a higher degree of external validity because the real-life settings that researchers use in the field are normal environments and encourage participants to respond naturally. The control available to researchers in field experiments, however, is rarely as tight as the control available to them in laboratory experiments because of the uncontrollable factors that exist in any natural environment.

## Terms and Concepts

Before we discuss specific designs, we briefly should examine (or reexamine in some cases) some important terms so that you have a better understanding of research designs. The basic purpose of an experiment is to determine causation. In an applied public relations setting, practitioners might be interested in determining the effect of a public relations campaign or program on the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of target audience members. Each of these represent *variables* we are examining. In its simplest sense, a *variable* is a phenomenon or event that we can measure and manipulate (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). In the preceding example, the public relations program we are testing is the independent variable. The *independent variable* is the variable that researchers manipulate in an experiment to see if it produces change in the dependent variable. Changes in the *dependent variable* depend on, or are caused by, the independent variable. If we wanted to examine the effects of potential campaign messages on target audience members, the messages are the independent variables. As independent variables, the campaign messages affect the dependent variables in the experiment, which are the opinions or attitudes of target audience members toward our organization.

In addition, we might manipulate the independent variable (the content of the campaign message) to determine how to make it more effective. We might consider a humorous message versus a serious message, for example. In this case, variable manipulation is a critical aspect of study

design. We must make sure our humorous and serious messages are equal in terms of key points and features so that the only difference between the messages is the existence of humor or the lack of humor. If all other message characteristics are equal, any differences in participants' responses to the messages most likely would be due to humor. This controlled experiment allows us to test the effect of humor on participants' responses to our message and gives us a scientific basis for determining cause and effect.

Initially, you may notice that in experimental research designs, participants are assigned to a condition. A *condition* consists of all the people in an experiment who are treated the same way. In a source credibility experiment, for example, some participants are exposed to a message delivered by a high-credibility spokesperson, whereas other participants are exposed to a message delivered by a low-credibility spokesperson. Each group exposed to the same spokesperson in our example is part of the same condition.

Participants in the same condition are exposed to the same treatment. A *treatment* occurs when the participants in a condition are exposed to the same material, or *stimulus*, which typically contains the independent variable. Although it sounds confusing, it is really very simple. In the credibility experiment, for example, the message from a high-credibility source is one stimulus, and each participant who receives that stimulus receives the high-credibility treatment (these participants are in the same condition). In the same way, the message from a low-credibility source is a different stimulus. Participants exposed to the message from the low-credibility source receive the low-credibility treatment and are in the same condition.

Researchers typically place some participants in a condition in which they receive no treatment, or at least a meaningless treatment. These participants are in the *control group* or *control condition*. Because control group members receive no meaningful treatment—in other words, they receive no independent variable exposure—researchers can understand the effects of simply conducting the experiment on participants' attitudes or behavior (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). In medical research, for example, members of a treatment condition receive an actual drug, whereas the control group members receive a placebo (commonly sugar pills). This allows researchers to determine the amount of patient improvement due to the new drug versus the amount of patient improvement caused by other factors, including participants' improved mental outlook perhaps caused by the special medical attention they are receiving as part of the study.

Finally, researchers assign participants to either a treatment condition or a control condition in a random manner. When *random* assignment is used, each participant has an equal chance of being included in a condition. Random assignment helps to eliminate the potential influence of outside variables that may hinder the determination of causation (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). If researchers do not randomly assign participants to

conditions, they cannot be sure the participants in each condition are equal before exposure to experimental stimuli. When the participants in each condition are not equal, this is called *selectivity bias*. Random assignment helps ensure the outcomes that researchers detect in an experiment are caused by exposure to stimuli not by previously existing differences among participants.

## Experimental Research Designs

There are several potential ways to design a true experiment, and although a specific design may have advantages in certain circumstances, no single design is best. Instead, the best experimental design typically depends on researchers' hypothesis or research questions, the nature of the independent and dependent variables, the availability of participants, and the resources available for the project. The three true experimental designs social scientists use are the *pretest–posttest design with control group*, the *posttest-only design with control group*, and the *pretest–posttest design with additional control groups*, commonly referred to as the *Solomon four-group design* (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

The pretest–posttest design with control group is a fundamental design of experimental research. Researchers use it often because it is applicable to a variety of different settings. When researchers use the pretest–posttest with control group design, they randomly assign participants to treatment or control groups, or conditions, and initially measure the dependent variable (this is the *pretest*) for each group. Research team members then apply an independent variable manipulation to participants in the treatment condition, followed by further testing to determine independent variable effects. The order of the research procedures, random assignment of participants to conditions, and use of a control group helps eliminate or avoid many of the potential problems that threaten to ruin the internal validity of the experiment. Although a detailed discussion of these problems (called *threats to validity*) is beyond the scope of this book, readers may be interested in reading a short but important book by Campbell and Stanley (1963).

If we wanted to test the effectiveness of a prosocial advertisement designed to encourage young people to eat healthy foods, for example, we could randomly assign participants to one of two conditions: the advertisement condition and the control condition. Initially, we would pretest participants' attitudes by having them complete a questionnaire that measures their attitudes toward eating healthy foods. Following the pretest, we would expose participants in the treatment condition to the advertisement, whereas participants in the control condition might watch a brief clip of a cartoon (perhaps *SpongeBob Squarepants*) containing no health-related information. Next, we would posttest participants' attitudes in both

conditions using the same questions and scales that we used in the pretest. Normally, participants' pretest attitudes toward healthy eating would be similar in both the treatment and the control conditions. If our advertisement was effective, however, the posttest scores of participants who viewed the prosocial advertisement would reflect some important changes. First, treatment group members would have more positive attitudes toward healthy eating than control group members. More important, the change in the attitudes of treatment group participants toward healthy eating would be greater than the change in the attitudes of control group participants. Because each condition was identical and only one condition received a treatment, any significant differences that existed between participants at the end of the experiment likely would have been caused by the treatment. As an additional note, if control group participants' attitudes changed in the same way that attitudes of treatment group members did, then we would not be able to determine causation and might have evidence of *testing* whereby all participants changed their answers because they were sensitized to the issue as a result of taking the pretest rather than watching the prosocial advertisement.

A second design that researchers commonly use when they conduct experiments is the posttest-only design with a control group. In this research design there is no pretest. Instead, research team members randomly assign subjects to treatment and control conditions. One group is exposed to the experimental manipulation, or treatment, followed by a posttest of both groups. After they collect posttest scores, researchers statistically compare participants' dependent variable scores. Returning to our previous example, if a posttest examination of participants' scores revealed that members of the treatment condition had more positive attitudes toward healthy eating than members of the control condition, then we could feel confident that these differences were due to the prosocial advertisement.

Pretesting, although an important part of experimental research, is not required to conduct a true experiment (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Instead, the random assignment of participants to conditions allows researchers to assume participants in each condition are equal at the beginning of the experiment. The random assignment of subjects controls for selectivity biases. This design is especially useful to researchers when pretesting is unavailable or inconvenient, or may somehow interfere with the experiment (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

The Solomon four-group design is a complete combination of the first two designs. The Solomon design uses four conditions, in conjunction with random assignment, to help identify and control threats to validity including the effects of pretesting on participants' attitudinal measurement scores. Participants in the first condition receive a pretest, a treatment, and a posttest. Participants in the second condition receive a pretest and a posttest with no treatment. Those in the third condition receive no pretest,

a treatment, and a posttest, whereas participants in the final condition receive only a single measurement, the equivalent of a posttest. Using our previous example, researchers measure participants' attitudes toward healthy eating and expose them to the prosocial advertisement in conditions one and three. In conditions two and four, however, participants receive no exposure to the treatment, only attitudinal measurement.

The Solomon four-group design is the most rigorous type of experiment, allowing researchers to separate and identify treatment effects independently of the effects of pretesting. In other words, researchers can figure out specifically whether participants' posttest scores changed because they were influenced by taking a pretest, as opposed to whether the experimental treatment caused their posttest scores to change. The biggest drawbacks to the use of the four-group design are practical. Four groups are needed to properly execute the design, requiring a high number of participants and increased costs. As a result, researchers' use of this design is relatively rare.

To this point, the research designs we have discussed are completely randomized designs. This means they require researchers to randomly assign all participants to one condition whether it is a control or a treatment condition. Researchers call this design *between-subjects* because they make determinations regarding treatment effects by finding differences between groups of participants, or subjects, based on their exposure to stimuli as part of a treatment condition. We can compare a between-subjects design to a *within-subjects* design in which researchers use each participant in all conditions. Experts commonly call this type of design a *repeated-measures* design because researchers measure each participant two or more times as they expose him or her to different stimuli throughout the course of an experiment. In this design, each participant serves as his or her own control by providing a baseline measure, and any differences in measurement scores researchers find between treatment conditions are based on measurements they take from the same set of participants (Keppel, 1991). When researchers are concerned about having enough participants, they may opt to use a within-subjects design because it requires fewer participants. This design also provides an important way for researchers to learn how variables combine to influence attitudes and behavior. This type of design is called a *factorial* design, and it allows researchers to learn how independent variables interact. In our previous example concerning attitudes toward healthy eating, it may be that gender and perceived body image combine to influence participants' responses to our prosocial advertisement. Researchers can examine how these variables interact when they use a within-subjects design.

Project managers sometimes use other designs that are not fully experimental, often when they have limited options and decide that collecting some data is better than collecting no data at all. Researchers commonly consider these designs preexperimental or quasiexperimental, and they

include case studies and the one-group pretest–posttest design among other possibilities. Quasiexperimental studies suffer from design flaws because they lack control conditions or because researchers use nonrandom procedures to assign participants to different conditions in an experiment. Researchers use quasiexperimental designs for various purposes, including exploration, but these methods are not scientific and practitioners, therefore, cannot trust their results.

It often is impossible or impractical to use probability sampling methods when recruiting experimental research participants. Instead, researchers commonly select participants using incidental, or convenience, samples in experimental research (see chapter 6). Because research participants may not be completely representative of a target audience or other population, the results of an experiment may lack external validity, or generalizability, from the sample to the population. In general, this is not as detrimental for explanatory research such as experiments as it is for descriptive research such as surveys. Social process and the patterns of causal relationships generally are stable across populations and, because of this, are more generalizable than individual characteristics (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). In reality, the samples used in experiments are so small that they would not be highly representative even if probability sampling were used. With this in mind, convenience sampling normally suffices in experiments when probability sampling is impossible or impractical, and researchers use random assignment to ensure participants' characteristics are equal or balanced in each condition.

As with any other research project, research team members should pretest variable manipulations (we also call these *treatments*), measurement questionnaires, and the procedures they will use in an experiment before they collect data. Pretesting allows researchers to correct any deficiencies in the procedures they will use for data collection and provides for a check of independent variable manipulations. A manipulation check is particularly important in helping to ensure the success of a study. A *manipulation check* is a procedure that helps researchers ascertain whether something that was supposed to happen actually did happen. If one community was supposed to see a fear-based prosocial advertisement, for example, and another community was supposed to see a humor-based advertisement, a manipulation check would help researchers determine whether the people in the communities thought the fear-based message actually was scary and the humorous message actually was funny.

Finally, research team members must develop a procedure for telling participants what the purpose of the study is and how they will use the study's results. Research managers answer participants' questions at this time in a process called *debriefing*. Debriefing allows researchers to eliminate potential harms, however small, that may befall participants as a result of their involvement in a research project. Debriefing must be

comprehensive enough to eliminate any long-term effects on participants that may result from project participation.

### **Bias in Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation**

It is essential for researchers to collect, analyze, and interpret data carefully. Project managers must pay particular attention to the introduction of bias during data collection. Bias may be introduced in several ways, including through the behavior of researcher team members. Any changes in participant behavior due to the actions of researchers introduce bias into the experiment, unless the behavior of the experimenter is intended to be part of the study. Researchers may inadvertently encourage a behavior they are seeking by demonstrating tension or relief, for example. One way researchers control unintended experimenter influences is by using automated procedures and equipment such as computers and DVDs. Project managers also can minimize bias by using researchers who, along with participants, generally are unaware of the purpose of a study (called a *double-blind* experiment) or who have differing expectations regarding experimental outcomes.

### **Experiment Critique**

When conducted properly, formal experiments allow researchers to isolate variables and establish causation. This is a powerful benefit that only properly designed and executed experiments provide. In laboratory experiments, researchers have a high degree of control over the research environment, independent and dependent variables, and the selection and assignment of subjects. This high degree of control and isolation provides conditions that are free from the competing influences of normal activity and ideal for examining independent and dependent variable relationships (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Although field experiments do not allow as high a degree of control as laboratory experiments, they generally provide enough control for researchers to make determinations of causation when properly conducted.

Another benefit of experimental research designs is their ease of replication. Because project managers typically make the variables and manipulations they use in experiments available to other researchers, it is common for social scientists to replicate research findings. Replication may take the form of an identical experiment or one that provides replication under slightly different conditions. The successful replication of research findings contributes to increased confidence in the validity and generalizability of research findings (Baxter & Babbie, 2004).

Finally, the cost of experimental research can be low when compared with other research methods. Laboratory research, in particular, tends to

be limited in scope, requiring relatively little time and a relatively small number of participants. These requirements often combine to provide a high degree of explanatory power at a relatively low cost.

There are two primary disadvantages to using experimental research designs: artificiality and the introduction of bias. Although isolation and control are necessary to determine causation, research environments may be so isolated and so controlled that they do not represent environments found in natural social settings. Here, the external validity, or generalizability, of research findings may be hindered. The artificiality of laboratory research settings presents a particular problem in applied campaign studies because it does not reflect the busy, competitive environment in which practitioners conduct most communication campaigns. In this instance, the generalizability of research findings from laboratory experiments to communication campaign settings may be limited.

A second disadvantage of experimental research is the potential for biased results. During an experiment there are a variety of possible sources of bias. When a study produces biased results, research outcomes are inaccurate and provide a poor basis for campaign planning and execution.

Finally, experiments can be challenging to conduct. It often is difficult, for example, for researchers to measure complex human processes using a series of simple questions or other measures. It may be that participants have never considered the reasons for some of their attitudes and behaviors, and they may find it difficult to identify their responses. Sometimes, participants simply are unable to express their feelings, even if it involves answering just a few questions. Project managers also may find it difficult to manipulate the stimuli used in experiments or to execute procedures with the care necessary to determine causation. In fact, it is possible to plan an experiment that is virtually impossible to conduct. Experiments, like all research methods, are useful only for specific situations, and campaign practitioners should carefully consider their limitations.

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis is a scientific research method used for describing communication content in a quantitative, or numerical, form. Researchers use content analysis to develop objective, systematic, and quantitative descriptions of specific aspects of communication (Berelson, 1952). Many communication campaign practitioners work to place messages in the media on a regular basis and continually monitor and track media coverage concerning issues, events, and clients. In public relations, clip files have long served as the basis for evaluating public relations campaign success and, right or wrong, organizational management typically sees them as a critical measure of practitioners' achievements (Broom & Dozier, 1990).

Evaluating the contents of clip files or other important media messages—including the messages of competing organizations—often is difficult. The sheer volume of material can make even a basic description and analysis a daunting task. When practitioners desire additional information concerning the specific content attributes of different stories—the tone of media coverage or the balance of media portrayals, for example—the task becomes quite difficult for researchers. Content analyses are objective because their results are not based on the informal observations and biases of those conducting the study but instead rely on an objective classification system. They are systematic because a set of procedures is established and a formal process is followed when media content is analyzed. Content analyses are quantitative because the results of the classification process produce numerical classifications of content that are subjected to appropriate statistical analyses. The result is a scientific (i.e., trustworthy) description of communication content in terms of the themes, styles, and techniques that exist within media messages.

If managers wanted to better understand the ways in which reporters portrayed their organization in local media, for example, a practitioner might decide to comb through a collection of media stories to determine the frequency of coverage, evaluate the general tone of the stories, and note recurring themes and major issues. This analysis would provide some useful information but likely would suffer from some important weaknesses. Alternatively, a practitioner could conduct a formal content analysis. In this case, the practitioner would determine the aspects of media coverage most important to the company and then categorize and quantitatively analyze media content. The results and conclusions from such a study potentially would be sophisticated and accurate and would provide managers with an unbiased assessment of the media coverage concerning the organization. Study findings could serve as the basis for future media relations efforts or might be part of an analysis of the messages of competing organizations. The results also might serve as a benchmark if the company decided to undertake an effort to improve its media coverage.

Content analyses typically require several steps similar to those used by project managers in survey research. In fact, a content analysis is a lot like a survey, except that the researchers collect and analyze samples of messages instead of people and their opinions. Initially, investigators identify a research problem and develop research questions or hypotheses. Next, they choose an appropriate sample of messages. Then, they determine the procedures and categories research team members will use when they code the content. Researchers must train those who code the data, and they usually conduct a small pilot study (the equivalent of a pretest) to ensure that the study is well designed. Content coding takes place once the pilot study proves successful, followed by data analysis and interpretation.

## Research Problem and Question/Hypothesis Development

As with any other research project, investigators must clearly understand the purpose of the study, including any problems that they must address, in the first phase of a content analysis. This helps them design a useful study with realistic procedures. A good research design clearly integrates the procedures for selecting the sample, the content categories and other aspects of the analysis, and study design into a comprehensive plan, as discussed in chapter 4. By implication, an investigator must understand the reason for the study, specify the evidence needed to test ideas or relationships, and know the methods of analysis that will be used once researchers gather and code the data.

Researchers can use content analyses to study almost any form of communication, although they most often use it to address research questions or hypotheses concerning specific message attributes. This may include an analysis of messages over time (e.g., to see whether media coverage concerning an issue has become more positive or negative), an analysis of messages occurring in different situations (e.g., during different or competing campaigns), or an analysis of messages directed to different audiences (e.g., messages in trade publications versus messages in general interest magazines). Researchers sometimes go beyond description to make inferences about the origins of messages based on the results of a content analysis. Such analyses generally focus on the author of a message and attempt to associate authorship with meanings and values inherent in the messages analyzed, such as to determine whether certain reporters or media outlets favor particular types of story themes.

Finally, too often researchers erroneously use content analyses to make inferences about the effects of messages on receivers, such as effects of violent content on children's behavior. Content analyses conducted for this purpose are fatally flawed because they make several untenable assumptions. As chapter 14 explains, people interpret similar messages differently. Exposure to a message does not lead to uniform message effects. Simply put, content analyses do not allow researchers to determine causation.

## Sample Selection

Researchers must select the messages to analyze after they have determined research questions or hypotheses. First, they determine the body of messages, or population, from which they will draw the sample, just as the survey manager chooses a population of people to study. In this process, also known as defining the *universe* or *sampling frame*, investigators choose the body of content from which they will draw their sample, such as popular magazines published during the past 6 months. Just as

with survey research, content analysts usually do not try to analyze all relevant messages (this would be a census). The sheer volume of potentially relevant messages normally makes some form of sampling necessary, especially given the time and monetary limitations that accompany most research projects. Researchers need to make sure the message population is comprehensive and logically consistent with the purposes and goals of their study.

It is important to distinguish between all the content potentially relevant to a study and a subset, or sample, of content researchers needed to answer research questions or test hypotheses. Various techniques lend themselves to the selection of materials for analysis. Sampling techniques are discussed in chapter 6.

Content analyses may require some type of multistage sampling involving sample selection procedures at two or more levels. At the initial stage of sample selection, researchers might select specific media sources—daily newspapers published within 6 months of an election, for example—from among all possible content sources. At a second stage of sampling, researchers might choose specific stories from each selected newspaper. Additional stages of sampling may be necessary, as well. Researchers may find it advantageous to first select specific pages, for example, and then select specific stories as an additional sampling stage.

### Units of Analysis

Determining the unit of analysis and content categories is a critical part of any content-based study because researchers can analyze content in different forms. Each form of content they analyze is a *unit* for purposes of measurement and evaluation. A *unit of analysis* is a distinct portion of content, meaning this is the element researchers actually count (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). Units of analysis can include stories or articles, words or terms, themes, paragraphs, characters, and more. In a study designed to examine the media's portrayal of an organization, for example, the units of analysis may include positive, negative, or mixed stories about the corporation, specific aspects of the corporation's image mentioned in stories, mention of specific corporate programs in stories, names of competing organizations stories contain, and other information managers deem relevant. Specification of the units of analysis often is challenging and generally requires research team members to pretest and make decisions through trial and error. Often researchers begin with a rough draft definition of a unit. Then they analyze a sample of representative content to see what kinds of problems exist. This procedure typically results in the modification and further refinement of unit descriptions.

## Categories of Analysis

Researchers code and classify units of analysis, placing them into categories created for a study. Researchers may label a newspaper story as being favorable or unfavorable in its portrayal of an organization, for example. Well-constructed categories are essential, forming the substance of an investigation. Researchers who develop content categories that are vaguely drawn or poorly articulated will produce a study with inferior quality and limited usefulness. To be effective, category systems must be *mutually exclusive*, *exhaustive*, and *reliable*. Categories are *mutually exclusive* when research team members can place a unit of analysis into only one category. If a unit simultaneously falls into more than one category, revisions are necessary for either or both categories. One means of avoiding problems related to exclusivity is to have category definitions that possess a high degree of specificity. When project managers use well-defined category units, research team members will have fewer questions regarding unit placement among categories.

Categories must be exhaustive, in addition to being mutually exclusive. Categories that are *exhaustive* provide space for every existing unit of analysis. It is necessary for project managers to expand content categories when researchers discover units that are not covered by existing categories. When only a few miscellaneous units are not covered by existing category systems, researchers typically use an “other” category.

Finally, the category system must be reliable. To be *reliable*, different coders need to agree on the placement of units of analyses within categories most of the time. This is called *intercoder reliability*. Content categories that are poorly defined and lack specificity generally suffer from low intercoder reliability. Conversely, well-defined category systems increase intercoder reliability. The extensive pretesting of sample data for unit placement helps researchers develop and refine categories that are mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and reliable.

## Coding Content

Coding content involves the placement of units of analysis into content categories. This process generally is the most time-consuming aspect of content analysis, requiring researchers to train coders, develop a pilot study, and code the data. Reliability is critical in content analysis because content analyses are supposed to produce objective results. Researchers must use reliable measures to produce study results that are objective (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). The measures used in a study are reliable when repeated measurement of the same material produces the same results. Normally, a subset of data is coded by two coders working independently. Analysts

can compare the results of each coder's work to determine the level of accuracy between the coders. This produces a test of intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability can be calculated using one of several methods. Holsti (1969) reported a simple formula commonly used for calculating intercoder reliability:

$$\text{reliability} = \frac{M}{n_1 + n_2}$$

In this formula,  $M$  represents the number of coding decisions coders agreed upon, and each  $n$  refers to the total number of coding decisions made by the first and second coder, respectively. This formula has some limitations, but it is easy to use. Project managers may be interested in using other formulas if they need a more sophisticated measure of reliability. Researchers commonly use Scott's pi (1955) or Cohen's kappa (1960) in this case because these reliability coefficients take into account chance agreement between coders and provide a more accurate estimate of reliability.

The thorough training of coders generally results in a more reliable analysis. It is helpful to have several training sessions in which coders work on sample data. Investigators compare the results among coders, discuss differences, and then repeat this process. Coders rely on detailed instruction sheets, and rigorous training efforts normally result in higher intercoder reliability. After a thorough training period, research team members conduct a pilot study to check intercoder reliability. As a result of the pilot study, researchers may need to revise definitions and category boundaries and alter coding sheets. This process continues until coders are comfortable with the materials and procedures and are able to maintain a high degree of reliability.

Finally, research team members code content. They use standardized score sheets developed during training to help them collect data quickly and accurately. When coders are working with broadcast media, they often record it so that coders can start and stop a tape at their convenience. As a final note, researchers can enhance data collection with the use of computers, which they also use to tabulate and analyze the results.

### **Content Analysis Critique**

The objective and systematic nature of this research method often helps researchers to produce content descriptions and analyses that are high in validity and reliability and to avoid the subjective interpretations of less rigorous methods of analyzing content. In addition, many content analyses are inexpensive to conduct, and researchers can use them to examine content as it evolves over long periods of time. This gives researchers an

important perspective not easily available in other scientific research methods. Further, although most research methods typically pose little risk to participants, content analyses involve even less risk because human participants are not part of the population under investigation (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Together, these benefits make content analysis an attractive and useful research method.

Organizational managers must use content analysis carefully despite its potential usefulness. Kerlinger (1973) suggested that content analysis is not an easy method to use correctly. The primary concerns include problems of reliability, validity, and inference. The concept of reliability is of maximum importance in content analysis. A high degree of reliability may be particularly difficult to achieve when analyzing content such as negative political advertising. Determining whether a negative advertisement contains a direct attack on an opponent, for example, may involve making several slight distinctions between ads. Does an ad in which a candidate is referred to, but not named, contain a direct reference? Do ads that refer to a candidate's political party or position without mentioning the candidate by name contain direct references? Do ads that contain negative testimonials without naming a candidate contain direct references? Even determining whether an ad is negative or positive often involves making judgment calls. These types of difficulties are common in content analyses. They typically create problems for coders and contribute to low levels of reliability in content studies.

Researchers typically determine validity in content studies by examining the degree to which an instrument actually measures what it is supposed to measure. Validity is directly connected to the procedures used in content analysis. When sampling designs are incorrect, if categories are not mutually exclusive and exhaustive or if reliability is low, the results of a content analysis are inaccurate and possess a low degree of validity.

The final concern regarding the use of content analysis involves problems associated with inference. The strength of most content analyses depends on their ability to provide a precise description of communication content. Researchers sometimes are tempted, however, to use content studies to draw conclusions and interpretations of wider application than the content itself. Such interpretations are untenable. Practitioners purchasing content analytic services should carefully evaluate managers' claims based on the results of the analysis. There are a number of reputable organizations, including some public relations firms, that offer specialized content analysis. The problem comes when a company equates content analysis with public opinion analysis. Remember that public opinion resides in the perceptions of the public, not in the content of media messages.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Formal research methods provide essential information for communication campaign managers. Because formal methods offer objectivity, systematic data collection, representative samples, and replicable designs, they provide trustworthy information. Only dependable information can help practitioners accurately describe situations and publics, predict the outcome of an election, understand the reasons why public opinion seems to have turned against an organization, and exert some degree of influence over what happens in the future. Each formal method has its strengths and weaknesses, which means that practitioners can use each method well or misuse each method badly. As a result, a good understanding of the benefits and limitations of each method can help the managers conduct independent, in-house research. It also enables managers to knowledgeably weigh the promises and strategies of research firms and helps them to purchase reputable services that provide useful information at a reasonable cost.

# 10

## Making Research Decisions: Survey Research

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### Chapter Contents

- Mail Surveys
  - Telephone Surveys
  - Online Electronic Surveys
  - Personal Interviews
  - Final Thoughts
- 

When researchers conduct a survey they collect information directly from members of a population. It usually involves interviews and questionnaires that participants fill out alone or with the assistance of an interviewer. Practitioners' use of this method of research has grown dramatically over the past several years and today is a regular part of many organizations' communication programs. Survey research is an indispensable part of organizations' attempts to monitor their internal and external environments; solve complex problems; understand the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of key target audience members; track public opinion; engage in sophisticated campaign planning and evaluation; and, in some cases, seek media attention for an organization or client.

What is responsible for the rapid increase in the use of survey research? Organizations have increasingly felt the need to understand the opinions, attitudes, and behavioral motivations of their key target audience members, including legislators and government regulators, community members, consumers, employees, and other important groups. The environments in which organizations operate are more competitive; target

audiences are more sophisticated and, in some cases, given to greater activism. Single-issue activist groups, employees, and others are more likely to use the media to engage organizations in public debates using publicity and promotion techniques to gain the attention and support of the media, community watchdog groups, government regulators, and other key target audiences.

Practitioners want to ensure a high level of performance for their programs and campaigns, particularly as the costs of a campaign or program increase or as organizational certainty about a campaign or program decreases. In this case, survey research serves as a kind of insurance, providing critical information to practitioners as they plan and implement public relations programs and campaigns. Valid, reliable information replaces practitioners' reliance on past practices, hunches, industry standards, or rules of thumb. In these circumstances, survey research is an invaluable part of program planning and problem solving.

Finally, organizational management wants to know how practitioners are using resources and the return on investment they provide to an organization. Traditionally, practitioners have relied on favorable media coverage, key story placement, media clip counts, and similar methods to communicate the value of their publicity and promotions work to organizational management and clients (Pinkleton et al., 1999). Clients and managers initially are impressed when practitioners bring in large clip-filled binders and low cost-per-impression numbers. They grow skeptical, however, when they begin to ask larger, more important questions about the effect of public relations activities on the attitudes and behaviors of key target audience members ("PR Needs," 1993; "PR Pulse," 1994; Robinson, 1969). In this instance, survey research provides a more sophisticated means of tracking changes in the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of target audience members, and it is an indispensable tool for practitioners communicating the benefits of public relations activities to organizations and clients.

These are among the most critical issues practitioners face and are a large part of the reason practitioners' use of survey research has increased so rapidly over the past several years. As noted in chapter 9, surveys generally are descriptive or analytical in nature. Descriptive surveys characterize conditions and circumstances as they exist in a population, and analytical surveys attempt to explain why current conditions exist. In fact, many surveys serve both purposes, and this often meets practitioners' and organizations' needs for information. Surveys generally possess several advantages over other research methods in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of information.

Researchers primarily conduct surveys via mail, telephone, personal interviews, and the Internet via the world wide web. They can use each method in a relatively straightforward approach or adapt a method to reach

new audiences or to meet the demands of a particular research situation. In a typical survey, researchers initially set objectives for a study. Next, they design the study. When researchers design a study, they normally select a population and establish sampling procedures, select a survey method, and design and pretest a questionnaire. Next, members of a research team typically collect, edit, and code data. Finally, researchers analyze and interpret the results.

Because chapter 9 presents the research planning process, this chapter focuses on some of the key advantages and disadvantages of each survey method. This discussion raises an important issue. Clients and organizations, often looking to make quick decisions, frequently want to identify the single best survey research method. In reality, there is no best method of survey research, and it is a risky oversimplification to sort methods based on a scale of strengths and weaknesses (Frey, 1989). The method that is best for a project depends on various factors. Beyond the informational requirements of a project, researchers must consider the population and sample, the survey topic or topics, and the importance of reliability and validity. In addition, a project's budget and time frame often have a disproportionately large effect on survey-method selection (Pinkleton et al., 1999). As Dillman (1978) pointed out, researchers cannot answer the question of which research method is best without context. The potential advantages and disadvantages of each method do not apply equally, or even at all, to every survey situation. Choosing the most appropriate research method is critical, and for this reason, practitioners must consider their use of a survey method in relation to the needs and constraints of each situation.

With this in mind, it is beneficial for practitioners to understand each survey research method. The flexibility and adaptability of different survey methods inevitably leads to conflicting suggestions from researchers or others concerning an appropriate research method for a project. Practitioners serve their own interest by understanding at least some of the key issues associated with the use of one survey method over another, as well as other critical aspects of survey implementation such as issues associated with the use of probability versus nonprobability sampling. This understanding allows them to make an informed decision and makes them sophisticated consumers of the research products they purchase. The remainder of this chapter presents each of the primary survey research methods broadly and includes information about the potential benefits and limitations of these methods.

## MAIL SURVEYS

Traditional mail surveys are conducted by sending a questionnaire via regular mail to a sample of individuals. Participants fill out questionnaires and mail the surveys back to the researcher. A project manager typically

sends a cover letter with the questionnaire to explain the purpose of the survey and encourage sample members to respond. Researchers typically include stamped, addressed reply envelopes to encourage respondents to complete the surveys and mail them back to researchers. Researchers often use mail surveys because of their low cost and ease of administration. If a mailing list is available (and it often is), it is relatively easy to use it as the source of a probability-based sample. Several challenges face researchers using mail survey research including the length of time it takes to complete a project and the relatively low response rates of mail surveys. Despite these concerns, the low cost and ease of administration of mail surveys are among the advantages that make them an attractive choice to researchers.

### Mail Survey Considerations

There are many nuances that contribute to successful survey research, and this is especially true of mail surveys (Table 10.1). A mail survey is a self-administered questionnaire. This requires that the cover letter and questionnaire be carefully constructed and written to optimize the participation rate of sample members. Unfortunately, no matter how well a questionnaire and cover letter are written, this is not enough to ensure the success of a mail survey (Dillman, 1978). The result is that mail surveys often suffer from low rates of response despite researchers' best efforts to encourage participation. Although there are many keys to a successful mail survey project, practitioners must pay special attention to the cover letter and questionnaire, sampling method, and response rate to ensure the success of mail surveys (chapters 6, 11, and 12 contain more information about these important topics).

A well-written cover letter is critical to the success of a survey because it must introduce a survey to potential respondents who are busy and uninterested and motivate them to fill out the survey and return it immediately.

**TABLE 10.1**  
Characteristics of Mail Surveys

<i>Selected Benefits</i>	<i>Selected Limitations</i>
Inexpensive (lowest cost per respondent)	Frequently suffer from low response rates (often requires inducements and multiple mailings)
Reaches widely dispersed sample members easily	Data collection may take a long time
Mailing lists make it easy to generate probability-based sample	No questionnaire flexibility; short, self-explanatory questionnaire needed
May provide high degree of anonymity (useful for sensitive topics)	Survey respondent may not be selected sample member
No interviewer bias	Members of certain groups less likely to complete questionnaire

Beyond sending a prenotification card or letter to a potential participant, a cover letter usually is the only opportunity a researcher has to pique the interest of sample members, establish a minimal level of rapport, and anticipate and answer key questions. The difficulty of writing a good cover letter is increased because a long, dense letter that satisfactorily answers everyone's questions typically will discourage careful reading, or worse, it will cause potential respondents to throw the questionnaire away. The first two paragraphs of a cover letter usually explain who is sponsoring the study and what the study is about, and it is written to convince the reader that the study is useful. Later paragraphs are used to convince readers that their response is critical and to assure them of confidentiality. Researchers must accomplish all of this without biasing participants' responses (Czaja & Blair, 1996). Writing an effective cover letter can be difficult and perplexing. Given the importance of the cover letter to the success of a mail survey, researchers need to draft and pretest different letters to help ensure they have written a letter that reflects a tone of mutual respect (Dillman, 2000).

Mail surveys also require researchers to use carefully written and pretested questionnaires. Mail questionnaires require very careful writing and construction because they are self-administered and must be completely self-explanatory. Researchers must strive to produce an attractive questionnaire of reasonable length with plenty of white space and clear, simple instructions. The absence of an interviewer means there are no opportunities for interviewers to encourage survey response, help participants understand poorly written questions or instructions, or answer even basic participant questions (Dillman, 2000). Although researchers can provide a telephone number or e-mail address for such purposes, participants rarely use them. In fact, participants should not need to contact researchers in order to understand questions and instructions. Instead, the instructions and questions that researchers use in mail surveys must be written so that they are uniformly understood by as many potential respondents as possible (Czaja & Blair, 1996). Poorly written questions decrease the reliability and validity of survey results, and sample members who do not understand questions or instructions are unlikely to participate, resulting in low response rates.

Pretesting a questionnaire is essential to ensure that readers understand survey instructions, questions, and response categories. When project managers pretest a questionnaire, individuals who are similar to sample members in terms of key sample characteristics—such as age, education level, experience, or other relevant qualities—actually complete the survey, making note of confusing or unclear questions and instructions. Researchers also note and discuss other aspects of questionnaire administration with pretest participants such as the length of time they needed to complete the survey and various features they liked or did not like about the

questionnaire. There are many ways to pretest a questionnaire, and no single method is singularly advantageous. It is important, however, that researchers pretest all written material that potential respondents will receive, preferably several times. Experience shows that problems can sneak into even comprehensively tested questionnaires. Researchers correct most survey problems, however, through multiple pretests.

Even well-written and pretested mail surveys often suffer from low response rates, typically among the lowest response rates of the primary survey research methods. Although there are a variety of different formulas for determining survey response rates, the response rate generally is the percentage of sample members who actually participate in the survey (see chapter 12). A low response rate raises concerns of *nonresponse bias*. Nonresponse bias contributes to error in survey results because of differences between those who participate in a survey and those who do not (Adler & Clark, 1999). Simply put, when enough sample members choose not to participate in a survey, their lack of participation ruins the external validity, or generalizability, of a study's results.

Surveys that are well designed help increase participants' rate of response. Although each project is different, there are several elements to a successful project and a number of ways researchers work to increase mail survey response rates. Dillman (1978; 2000) noted that integration and consistency among the individual elements of a mail survey are keys to increasing mail survey participation. These most commonly include the use of prenotification and reminder cards or letters, as well as sending new cover letters and additional copies of the questionnaire to nonrespondents. Initially, a prenotification card or letter can be an effective way for research project managers to prepare respondents for survey participation. Typically, sample members receive this mailing 1 or 2 weeks before the questionnaire and cover letter are sent, and researchers use it to create understanding and even a small degree of anticipation among sample respondents. Researchers mail the cover letter and questionnaire next. The cover letter and questionnaire typically are followed by a reminder card or letter, or even better, a new letter and questionnaire, 2 or 3 weeks later. Researchers typically repeat this process more than once to offer potential respondents as many opportunities as is reasonably possible to participate in the survey.

Research suggests that follow-up mailings are an effective way to increase mail survey participation. In general, as sample members delay responding to a survey the likelihood that they will participate lowers. Properly timed follow-up mailings provide additional encouragement to respond. Researchers can use other techniques to help increase mail survey response rates as well, including sponsorship by a university or other respected institution; mailing questionnaires in envelopes with stamps rather

than metered or bulk rate markings; enclosing a stamped, self-addressed return envelope with the survey; and using relatively modest monetary incentives such as a \$2 bill or other small inducements.

There are other ways researchers attempt to increase response rates, but some attempts to produce increased participation may actually reduce participation. Using personalized envelopes or questionnaires—for example, when respondent anonymity is important or the topic of a survey is sensitive—is ineffective. It is critical for researchers to understand as much as possible about the topic and sample members and to pretest all aspects of a survey in order to increase their ability to obtain valid, reliable results from sample members.

The representativeness of mail survey results is increased through probability sampling methods, as discussed in chapter 6. One benefit of mail surveys is that practitioners can purchase the names and addresses of randomly selected members of a population from vendors who sell samples, often at a reasonable price. These same companies typically can provide highly specialized samples at a somewhat higher price. Such samples often are invaluable because they allow research team members to complete a survey using a probability-based sample, helping to increase the reliability and external validity of survey results. Some organizations and associations use their own mailing lists as the basis for a probability sample. The mailing list serves as the *sampling frame* (a list of population members from which researchers draw a sample), and researchers can randomly draw names and addresses from the list to form the sample. In this way, it is a relatively simple process for researchers to generate a probability-based sample to use when conducting a mail survey.

Practitioners should take care in the interpretation of research results, however, when mailing lists serve as the basis for a sample. Even though the sample is probability based, practitioners can legitimately generalize the results only to members of the mailing list. Ideally, a mailing list contains all of the members of a population. In this case, the results of the survey are likely to accurately reflect the true opinions and attitudes of all population members (given a certain range of error at a specific level of confidence; see chapter 6 for these calculations). In other instances, however, a mailing list is not a complete list of all members of a population. This might be the case, for example, if researchers are trying to survey members of a professional association using the association's mailing list. Any sample generated using such a mailing list would produce results that are directly generalizable only to members of the association and not to all members of the profession. This matter may seem small and technical, but it is important. Study results are as trustworthy as the sample on which they are based. Researchers must use mailing lists with care and consider the ramifications of sampling decisions before plunging into data

collection. Practitioners cannot increase the generalizability of a survey's results once a study is complete.

### Mail Survey Critique

Mail surveys are among the least expensive survey research methods. This benefit alone contributes greatly to their popularity. Although there are situations in which other survey methods may cost less, in most instances, mail surveys provide the ability to cover a large geographical area at a low cost per respondent (Dillman, 1978). For many surveys, there generally are similar costs associated with developing and producing a questionnaire, securing a sample, and analyzing and interpreting the results. Two methodological benefits significantly reduce the cost of mail surveys relative to other research methods. The first is postage; researchers can contact sample members for the same low cost whether they live across town or across the country. Although telephone surveys also can be inexpensive, mail surveys often enjoy a cost savings because of mail distribution. The second cost-savings benefit results from lower administrative costs. Project managers do not need interviewers to collect data; therefore, these surveys generally require fewer people to complete the data-collection process. Although it is important that a knowledgeable staff member assemble materials, track responses, mail follow-ups, and edit and code returned questionnaires, mail surveys almost always require fewer administrative resources than other survey methods.

Research managers also use mail surveys to reach widely dispersed sample members. Although researchers can use other methods to reach dispersed sample members—often at increased costs—mail surveys easily address this issue. In addition, mail surveys allow for selective probability sampling through specialized mailing lists. Although researchers must be concerned about the limited generalizability of survey results when they use lists as a sampling frame, mailing lists can make excellent sampling frames in appropriate research settings. Researchers may use a selected list, for example, when they need to sample a highly specialized, professional population. Researchers also can use mail surveys to collect information from sample members such as this because they are busy and are unlikely to participate in a telephone or personal interview.

Researchers may choose mail surveys when they desire a high degree of respondent anonymity (Mangione, 1995). Respondents may be more likely to provide candid answers to questions concerning sensitive subjects because they are not speaking directly to an interviewer. Research indicates, for example, that respondents can more easily answer questions about highly personal issues such as drunk driving convictions or personal bankruptcy using self-administered questionnaires (Aday, 1989; Locander, Sudman, & Bradburn, 1976). In addition, researchers generally

are less concerned about the introduction of interviewer bias into study results when they use mail surveys. Respondents typically are sensitive to both verbal and nonverbal cues during the interview process, and sometimes they interpret these cues as supportive or unsupportive of their opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. Respondents may change their answers as a result. Survey results concerning racial prejudice, for example, would be ruined if participants changed their answer because they sensed interviewer disapproval for their prejudicial opinions and attitudes. Instead of an accurate measure of racial prejudice, study results would be skewed by participants who provide socially desirable responses because of perceived interviewer influence. Researchers who are studying sensitive subjects or who have concerns regarding the potential for interviewer bias can use mail surveys to help eliminate such problems.

Perhaps the greatest concern practitioners have when they use mail surveys is their low rate of response. It is not uncommon for mail surveys to have response rates ranging from 5% to 40% (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Although it is possible to achieve higher response rates (Dillman, 2000), a low return rate casts doubt on the validity and reliability of a survey's findings by introducing nonresponse bias. Mail surveys with enough follow-up to obtain a high response rate typically require at least 8 weeks to conduct regardless of a sample's size or its geographic location (Czaja & Blair, 1996; Schutt, 1996). In many instances, 8 weeks is too long to wait given the time constraints that typically accompany research projects, particularly when researchers typically can conduct telephone surveys in less than half that time. In addition, the need for incentives and multiple mailings increases survey costs.

Another significant problem with mail surveys concerns the need for questionnaires to be self-explanatory and relatively short to encourage survey participation. Because no one is available to explain questions or provide additional information, researchers must make survey instructions, question wording, and question skip patterns—necessary when certain questions apply to some but not all participants—extremely simple and clear. Even when questions and instructions are clear, some respondents skip questions or even entire sections of a questionnaire for any number of reasons. Additionally, researchers can never be sure who has actually filled out a survey. Despite the fact that research project managers usually direct surveys to specific individuals, these selected sample members may ask other individuals who are not a part of the sample to fill out questionnaires. Finally, project managers are less likely to receive returned surveys from respondents who are low in educational attainment, who do not like to read or write, and who are not interested in the survey subject (Czaja & Blair, 1996; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Any of these concerns, working individually or together, may introduce bias that threatens the accuracy, reliability, and validity of study results.

## TELEPHONE SURVEYS

Telephone surveys involve contacting respondents and conducting personal interviews by telephone. This method of data collection represents a middle ground between mail surveys and personal interviews in that telephone surveys offer many of the advantages of personal interviews at a cost that often is competitive with that of mail surveys (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Although they do not offer the high degree of flexibility present in personal interviews, telephone surveys offer researchers more control and, until recently, consistently higher response rates than many mail surveys. Research team members also can complete telephone survey data collection in less than half the time it takes to complete a mail survey. In many research situations, telephone surveys can provide substantially the same information as a face-to-face interview at about half the cost (Groves, 1989). These benefits have contributed to a rapid increase in the researchers' use of telephone survey research, although technology now is eroding the viability of this survey method by reducing participation.

### Telephone Survey Considerations

Telephone surveys (Table 10.2) require interviewers to introduce the survey to sample members or perhaps reintroduce the survey if research managers have mailed prenotification cards or letters. Interviewers also must obtain cooperation, present instructions, ask questions, provide answer categories, and motivate participants to answer questions. They must do this while they answer any questions participants have and effectively administer the survey and record answers (Saris, 1991). Throughout this process, an interviewer ideally operates as a neutral vehicle through which

**TABLE 10.2**  
Characteristics of Telephone Surveys

<i>Selected Benefits</i>	<i>Selected Limitations</i>
Relatively inexpensive (reasonable cost per respondent)	Interviewer bias may occur
Data collection can be completed quickly	Not every household has a telephone (potential source of bias)
Reaches widely dispersed sample members relatively easily	Product and service innovations make it difficult to reach sample members
Lists or random digit dialing make it easy to generate probability-based sample	Short, largely self-explanatory questionnaire required
Response rates relatively high (but falling)	Limited interview flexibility
Rapport established with respondent can help gain compliance	Respondents may not answer thoughtfully

a respondent's answers are communicated to researchers (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). It is a complex process that requires carefully trained interviewers. Telephone surveys require well-written questionnaires and instructions because they rely solely on verbal communication. Because of this, survey design and construction are based on utility rather than on aesthetics. The interviewers' job is more difficult and the quality of the data collected is reduced if instructions, questions, and response categories are unclear.

Problems are also likely if question order does not proceed in an obvious manner with the aid of transitional statements, if question placement is irregular or lacking apparent topical organization, or if the survey lacks easily understood instructions (Frey, 1989). Interview questions and survey design issues often revolve around the needs of an interviewer to attract and keep a potential respondent's attention. Questionnaires typically flow from introductory questions designed to maximize respondent interest to issue-oriented questions that provide critical information about respondents' opinions, attitudes, and behavioral motivations, and then to routine demographic questions. Project managers use open-ended questions, which require interviewers to record a respondent's answer verbatim, sparingly because these questions take time, interrupt questionnaire flow, and require additional coding during data analysis. Given the importance of a well-designed survey instrument, questionnaire pretesting and comprehensive interviewer training are a pivotal part of telephone survey success.

Although each survey is different and typically requires specialized interviewer training, there are common threads to successful training of telephone interviewers. First, project managers want interviewers to pay particular attention to the survey introduction because this is the first point of caller contact. Second, interviewers need to learn to read questions exactly as they are written or appear on a computer screen; practice answering respondents' questions; practice selecting survey participants after they have made initial phone contact, if necessary; and learn how to encourage respondents to use appropriate response categories as necessary. They must accomplish all of this while providing neutral feedback and probes so that they will not influence participants' responses. Interviewers also must prepare for survey questions that, although necessary, are unusual or potentially bothersome to respondents, such as questions concerning their age or income. Finally, interviewers must complete a call record. This is a record of the result of each call attempt, and it provides project managers with information they need to determine sample members who receive additional call attempts and to determine the response rate for a survey. The number and complexity of these and other issues necessitate thorough interviewer training before ever calling sample members (we provide tips for training interviewers in chapter 12). Also, this training enables interviewers

to provide participants with a pleasant interview experience and helps encourage higher rates of response.

Precontact in the form of letters or cards effectively increases response rates in a manner similar to mail survey research. Prenotification letters or cards also can help legitimize a study by providing information about why researchers are contacting sample members, the kind of information interviewers will request, and the benefits of participation to sample members. Providing general information concerning the timing of survey phone calls helps to reduce the surprise associated with receiving an unanticipated phone call from an unknown source. Depending on the sample, many interviewers place initial calls on weeknight evenings (excluding Friday) from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Interviewers make callback attempts when they are unable to reach sample members during an initial call attempt. Although the number of callbacks differs according to survey characteristics, Wimmer and Dominick (2006) reported that three callbacks produce contact about 75% of the time, with six callbacks achieving contact about 95% of the time.

As with all research methods, the external validity, or generalizability, of telephone survey results depends on researchers' use of probability-based sampling methods, which are explained in chapter 6. One benefit of telephone survey research is that, similar to mail surveys, research managers can purchase names and phone numbers of randomly selected members of a population from commercial sample vendors at a reasonable price, allowing them to use probability-based sample relatively easily. These same companies typically can provide specialized samples at a higher price.

When researchers choose not to purchase a sample, they often can use either print or electronic telephone directories, typically available for free or at a low cost, as the basis for sampling. Of course, no telephone directory is entirely representative of a population because some households have unlisted telephone numbers. In some communities, the proportion of households with unlisted telephone numbers exceeds 50% (Survey Sampling, Inc., 1994), leaving a large portion of the population unavailable for sampling from a telephone directory, particularly in urban areas (Frey, 1989; Lavrakas, 1993). Researchers typically use a random-digit dialing (RDD) technique to overcome problems with unlisted telephone numbers and produce a probability-based sample. The importance of randomization is explained in chapter 6.

Theoretically, RDD provides an equal probability of reaching a household with a telephone access line regardless of whether its telephone number is listed or unlisted, and it replicates what would occur if a complete sampling frame existed (Lavrakas, 1993). There are several RDD techniques including some that are computer based. Most RDD techniques rely on standard area codes and telephone number prefixes that correspond geographically to a desired population, and they use a randomization

technique to produce a telephone number suffix (the last four digits of a phone number).

In some of the more common but cumbersome RDD techniques, research staff members draw telephone numbers out of an appropriate telephone directory by hand and randomly change the last four digits to create a new number. They may add a number between 1 and 9, for example, to the last digit of a phone number. The added digit can be a constant or can be assigned randomly to each new number. In the plus-one method, research staff add 1 to the last digit of a telephone number suffix to produce a new telephone number. So, if staff members draw the telephone number 123-4567, they dial 123-4568. In a common variation of this technique, researchers use a table of random numbers (typically found in the back of statistics textbooks) to generate numbers used to replace one or more telephone number suffix digits (Frey, 1989; Lavrakas, 1993). Although such techniques produce unusable telephone numbers such as businesses or government offices, which adds to survey costs, they also produce a probability-based sample that provides coverage of unlisted telephone numbers, excluding cell phone numbers.

Once interviewers make initial telephone contact, some studies require randomization of household members within each household. If the household itself is the unit of analysis, any adult member can provide the information needed and within-household selection procedures are not necessary. When researchers seek results that are generalizable to an entire population of adults rather than households, however, interviewers must use a systematic process for selecting the member of the household to interview. If staff members do not use selection procedures, the resulting sample may include disproportionately high numbers of women and older adults, who are most likely to be home when interviewers call (Lavrakas, 1993; Salmon & Nichols, 1983).

Scholars and research practitioners have developed various selection procedures to avoid possible bias resulting from interviewing the person who answers the telephone. Unfortunately, they can be complex and unwieldy to use (Kish, 1965). When interviewers use selection procedures, they typically increase survey costs because of the extra time required to identify and select respondents and the need to make additional callbacks when selected respondents are unavailable. In addition, interviewers may experience additional refusals because interviewees are confused or frustrated by the procedures they must follow before an interview begins. One method that has gained widespread acceptance for randomizing respondent selection is to ask for the eligible person in the household whose birthday was most recent or who will have the next birthday (Salmon & Nichols, 1983). Although some researchers have expressed concerns that these methods do not always produce a completely randomized sample, the birthday-selection method has been widely embraced by both scholars

and research practitioners because it is generally effective, easy to use, not time consuming, and not intrusive (Lavrakas, 1993).

Finally, computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) now is common among universities and commercial research firms. When research projects rely on CATI systems, interviewers use computers to facilitate nearly every aspect of the interview process. The computer dials the telephone number and the interviewer reads the introduction, respondent-selection procedures, and questionnaire off the screen. Interviewers use the computer to record and code responses and to help with statistical analysis. A CATI system is particularly useful if a questionnaire has complicated skip patterns or if researchers desire randomization of questions within a survey. The development of computer technology in connection with data collection is growing rapidly, and when a research organization properly implements a CATI system, it has the ability to improve the quality of telephone survey research.

### Telephone Survey Critique

The benefits of telephone survey research have contributed to an increase in the popularity of this type of data collection. In particular, telephone surveys are relatively cost effective. Although they generally are more expensive than mail surveys, they often are less expensive than personal interview surveys. In addition, the short time in which researchers can complete a telephone survey is highly advantageous to practitioners. Given the importance of cost and time factors in many research project decisions (Pinkleton et al., 1999), these factors make telephone surveys the frequent choice of research professionals and public relations practitioners.

In addition, telephone survey data-collection methods have improved over the past several years to the point that telephone survey research compares favorably with other methods of data collection in terms of data quality. Research staff can collect data from a widely dispersed sample. If a list suitable as a sampling frame is available, research staff can draw a probability-based sample. If a suitable list is not available, staff members often can use RDD to produce a probability-based sample. Either way, researchers use telephone surveys to produce survey data with a high degree of reliability and external validity.

Telephone surveys also have had strong response rates in the past, generally much higher than typical mail survey response rates, although participation has been falling. Not long ago, telephone survey response rates commonly ranged from 60% to 90% (Czaja & Blair, 1996), and Wimmer and Dominick (2006) have suggested that telephone survey participation still is relatively high once interviewers contact qualified participants. Unfortunately, basic technology such as answering machines, voicemail, and caller identification, and now cell phones and elaborate call screening

technologies, are making it more and more difficult for interviewers to make initial contact with sample members. Even after interviewers make initial contact, sample members may suspect they are the target of a sales attempt or simply resent an interruption and terminate an interview before it is completed. In general, cooperation rates for large national media surveys conducted over several days have fallen to around 38% but may dip into the teens for overnight surveys (Morin, 2004). As participation drops, this raises questions about the external validity, reliability, and accuracy of telephone survey research.

What does all of this mean for the future of telephone survey research? No one knows for certain, but so far, telephone interviews still are viable as a research method. The results of a face-to-face survey of 2,000 randomly selected adults, for example, indicated that in 2004 only 2.5% did not have a traditional home phone and instead relied only on their cell phone (Morin, 2004), although this number may be higher among young adults. More important, recent research concerning differences among participants and nonparticipants in surveys indicate that, so far, increasing rates of nonparticipation do not appear to strongly impact the quality or accuracy of survey research data (Grosse & Ridout, 2004; Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, & Presser, 2000; Morin, 2004). Although this situation may change, indications are that nonparticipation currently is not hurting survey research.

Despite these challenges, it still is important for project managers to do all they can to encourage as much participation as possible. Telephone surveys are likely to enjoy stronger respondent participation when research staff members write and pretest survey introductions and questionnaires carefully, send prenotification cards or letters, and use callbacks as needed, and when the project is sponsored by a university or respected institution. Some organizations that conduct telephone surveys even offer respondents small monetary incentives for participating in surveys.

Well-trained and experienced interviewers are indispensable in helping to secure participation and help increase the quality of data studies produce. By providing answers to participants' questions, negotiating complex questions, and helping the data-collection process move forward in an orderly fashion, interviewers contribute significantly to the accuracy and reliability of study outcomes. In addition, interviewers may be able to establish rapport with respondents that helps them to obtain complete and accurate information, and sometimes this convinces respondents to complete an interview. At the same time, the use of interviewers raises concerns about the potential for introducing bias into survey results. Interviewers should have no influence on respondents' answers, but instead serve simply as a means of data collection. Interviewers require thorough training to learn how to provide neutral feedback and answer respondents' questions in a nonbiasing manner. In addition, interviewers need to have

a high level of experience when project managers are concerned about the potential for bias.

Finally, telephone interviews are limited in some respects. Perhaps most obvious is that researchers' use of visuals and similar interview aids is severely hampered. In addition, project managers' instructions, questions, and response categories must be easy for sample members to understand because interviewers are reading them over the telephone. Participants must be able to remember the question and the appropriate response categories, and they typically have no time to examine personal records or other information before responding to a question. Open-ended questions are difficult for researchers to use in a telephone survey because they require the interviewer to record a response verbatim—made easier by the digital recording capabilities of CATI software—and commonly result in short answers that are difficult to interpret. In addition, researchers have no control over the survey environment. Incoming calls, the doorbell, children, or a loud television commercial commonly interrupt an interview, especially when respondents are making little attempt to understand and participate in a study. These interruptions and distractions sometimes require interviewers to schedule a callback that may result in an incomplete interview.

Project managers also must keep interviews relatively short. Most respondents are unwilling to spend a great amount of time on the phone answering questions. Although 30 minutes or less is an acceptable interview length, many market researchers try to keep an average interview under 10 minutes. It can be difficult or impossible to collect a large amount of high-quality data in such a short interview. Despite these difficulties, telephone surveys are proven research method frequently used by scholars, pollsters, and public relations practitioners.

## ONLINE ELECTRONIC SURVEYS

The Internet, e-mail, and the world wide web have dramatically impacted survey research as a field, and the number of surveys administered electronically continues to grow (Shannon, Johnson, Searcy, & Auburn, 2002). Today, most studies of this type range from relatively simple questionnaires contained in, or attached to, e-mail messages, to sophisticated web-based survey systems. Unlike traditional mail and telephone surveys, researchers still are determining the best principles to use when constructing and implementing surveys, although preliminary research indicates that many of the same principles that apply to telephone and especially mail surveys also apply to online surveys (Shannon, Johnson, Searcy, & Lott, 2002). Survey research experts are making significant progress in this area (see Dillman, 2000, for a general discussion) and as more and more households gain Internet access, electronic surveys have the potential to revolutionize survey research practices.

## Online Electronic Survey Considerations

In general, surveys e-mailed to sample members as part of a message or as an attachment are quite simple. Project managers contact sample members using an initial e-mail message that contains a cover letter, and participants typically respond by replying to the original message or as an attached file, which they send back. Researchers can compose and send these surveys with relative ease because they generally require few technical skills, and survey distribution is instantaneous. The questionnaire normally appears in a basic text format that is relatively easy for participants to use, although research concerning e-mail questionnaires indicates that respondents may struggle with basic problems such as remembering to reply to an e-mail message so that they can submit their questionnaire or having problems with attachment conversions (Dillman, 2000; Shannon et al., 2002).

Researchers using this method generally cannot encourage survey participation through visual stimulation, and these surveys provide no opportunity for researchers to interact with respondents. In addition, researchers have almost no way to effectively address relatively common aspects of questionnaire design such as skip patterns. Although electronic surveys delivered via e-mail offer researchers a quick and inexpensive way to collect data in a relatively short period of time, researchers also are quite limited in the options they have available as they try to create effective questionnaires and encourage participant response.

When researchers conduct web-based surveys, they typically contact sample members using an e-mail message that contains an appropriate link to the research project. Participants then complete the survey online and submit the completed instrument with the click of a button. Because the web offers flexible and sophisticated design options to research managers, they can design surveys with a number of features to encourage sample members to complete the questionnaire and to provide accurate information as they do so. Web-based surveys allow participants to answer questions involving complicated skip patterns, for example, without their knowledge that the questions are even part of a skip pattern. In addition, researchers can design surveys with a variety of features including graphics and sound, which they can use to encourage respondents to complete a questionnaire. Researchers' use of pop-up instructions makes it easier to help respondents at a time when they actually need assistance, and devices such as drop-down boxes with answer choices help eliminate researchers' use of open-ended questions and help provide high-quality data (Dillman, 2000). Although surveys on the web require the greatest amount of technical knowledge—and because of this, many web-based surveys have been developed by technology specialists rather than survey research experts—they also produce the greatest potential benefit to researchers in terms of the quality of data collection (Shannon et al., 2002). Because of this, the

**TABLE 10.3**  
**Characteristics of Electronic Surveys**

<i>Selected Benefits</i>	<i>Selected Limitations</i>
Generally inexpensive	Internet access is limited; it is impossible to conduct a representative survey of the general population
Flexible method	Potential participants need reasonably equipped computer and basic computer competence
Reaches widely dispersed sample members easily	Online documents and attachments may reformat so that they are impossible for sample members to open or read
Immediate delivery and potentially quick data collection	Volunteer samples may produce results low in generalizability
No interviewer bias	May suffer from low response rates

challenge for survey research specialists is to integrate appropriate principles of survey design and implementation with electronic survey research (Dillman, 2000).

### Online Electronic Survey Critique

The advantages of online electronic surveys are numerous. In particular, electronic surveys typically cost less even than regular mail surveys because of the lack of postage and production costs. Web-based surveys also have a high degree of flexibility. Because of the benefits of immediate delivery, researchers can use these surveys when sample members are widely dispersed geographically. In addition, the substantially shortened time it takes researchers to deliver and receive questionnaires reduces the time it takes for them to complete a project. Interviewer bias generally is not a concern to project managers when they use online surveys, and the availability of sampling lists and password-protected websites allows researchers to conduct probability sampling in some instances.

In spite of these obvious advantages, however, researchers' potential use of online surveys are tempered by the reality that only about 60 to 75% of households in the United States had Internet access as of 2005 (Couper, 2000), and some assert that this number appears to be at a relative standstill or, more likely, climbing quite slowly (Richardson, 2004). As a result, it is impossible for project managers to use an online survey to conduct a general population study with an acceptable level of external validity, or projectability, because up to 40% of the population cannot participate in the survey. This does not mean that researchers cannot use electronic surveys, but it does mean that they must use them to collect information from carefully selected populations. Internet use among college-based populations

such as students and professors, for example, is quite high, and a survey of these populations is less likely to suffer from problems due to a lack of Internet access. Readers also should note that when researchers post surveys on bulletin boards and simply invite participation, the resulting sample is self-selected and not representative of any population. Ultimately, the reliability, validity, and accuracy of a survey's results will be extremely low as a result of these limitations.

Problems with low response rates also are a potential concern to researchers who use electronic surveys. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) report that the click-through rate on an electronic survey, where Internet users access a survey by clicking on a link, is 1% to 30%. Although some researchers undoubtedly can achieve higher participation (Dillman, 2000), this requires additional resources, which increase the cost and time it takes researchers to complete electronic surveys. As before, a low return rate potentially introduces bias into survey results and raises concerns about the validity and reliability of a survey's findings.

In addition, online communication is far from problem free. Documents and attachments sent via electronic mail commonly suffer a host of problems. They may end up reformatted to such an extent that they are difficult or impossible for recipients to open or read. In addition, online projects typically require respondents to have a reasonably equipped computer, and they must possess a basic level of computer competence to participate in a survey. Although most members of some populations have proper equipment and abilities, members of other populations do not. As a result, researchers must use online surveys carefully and interpret their results conservatively. Online electronic surveys have tremendous potential that researchers are just beginning to realize. Currently, many researchers have tempered their enthusiasm and use of this method, however, given the realities of incomplete Internet penetration among U.S. households, which make online surveys problematic for surveying many populations.

## PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

When investigators conduct personal interviews, they typically collect information in a respondent's home, office, or other convenient location. Research staff members administer questionnaires in a face-to-face interview, record respondent's answers, and possibly collect other information. There generally are two types of personal interviews: unstructured and structured.

In an *unstructured*, in-depth interview, interviewers ask broad questions and give respondents freedom to respond as they wish. The results of these interviews typically lack a high degree of validity and reliability because of the unstructured nature of the interview and sample limitations. The

**TABLE 10.4**  
**Characteristics of Personal Interviews**

<i>Selected Benefits</i>	<i>Selected Limitations</i>
Higher response rates	Often expensive; typically highest cost per respondent
Interviews establish rapport with participants	Requires high degree of administration and interviewer training
Often results in high quality data	Data collection may take a relatively long time
Bias from sampling frame often is low	Strong potential for interviewer bias
High degree of interview/questionnaire flexibility	Some sample members difficult to reach

result is that in-depth interviews are largely an informal research method (discussed in chapter 7).

In a *structured* interview, interviewers ask questions in a predetermined order and have less freedom to deviate from the questionnaire, also called a *survey schedule*. The result is an interview process that often produces high-quality data, has a reasonable response rate, and lends itself well to various topics and question types. For these reasons, many scholars and market research professionals have historically favored personal interviewing as a survey research method.

Several factors, however, have reduced the use of personal interviewing for survey research purposes. Factors such as a high cost per completed interview, the long time researchers need to complete a research project, and the need for a high degree of administration and coordination have contributed to a decline in the large-scale use of personal interviews. Nevertheless, personal interviewing is a flexible and effective survey method that serves many survey research project settings effectively.

### Personal Interview Considerations

In many research situations, several important benefits result from having an interviewer collect data in a one-on-one meeting with a survey participant (Table 10.4). A face-to-face meeting allows interview staff to interact and build rapport with potential participants, helping to increase survey response rates. In addition, after an unsuccessful contact attempt at the household of a sample member, an interviewer may visit with neighbors or generally observe the characteristics of a household or neighborhood to determine a better time to return for an interview (Groves & Lyberg, 1988). As a result, personal interview surveys historically have had the highest response rates of any of the primary research methods, typically ranging from 65% to 95% (Czaja & Blair, 1996). A high level of personal interaction also increases the likelihood that interviewers will obtain complete and accurate information by creating a comfortable interview atmosphere.

This factor is important when interviews are long or questionnaires contain complex questions or skip patterns. In this instance, the interviewer has a great deal of influence over the administration of the questionnaire and other aspects of the data-collection process.

Personal interviews also are highly flexible, much more so than other survey methods. Research staff can answer respondents' questions; seek additional information to clarify ambiguous responses; show charts, pictures, or graphs; and even estimate respondent information such as general appearance or general living conditions. Finally, personal interviews do not depend on the literacy or education level of respondents, and they are not limited to persons with telephones, computers, or online access. Although this does not eliminate sampling bias concerns in personal interviews, it does address some sampling bias concerns. Ultimately, the use of face-to-face interviews can significantly improve the reliability and external validity of survey results.

Personal interviews, however, are highly susceptible to bias. Interviewer-related bias, or error, occurs in face-to-face interviews when participants vary their answers because of the person conducting the interview (Fowler & Mangione, 1990). Participants who sense that interviewers agree or disagree as they respond to certain questions, for example, may wittingly or unwittingly alter their answers to survey questions. Respondents also may hesitate to report sensitive information and are more likely to provide socially desirable responses in personal interviews (Czaja & Blair, 1996). In research concerning racial attitudes, for example, participants are more likely to give socially desirable responses when the interviewer and interviewee are of different races (Campbell, 1981).

The need for extensive interviewer training and standardized interview techniques is important in personal interview surveys, given the importance of the interviewer in the data-collection process. Although it is difficult to accomplish, a standardized interview process in which all interviewers conduct their work in a consistent manner reduces interview-related error (Fowler & Mangione, 1990).

Two aspects of personal survey administration merit special attention. The first is the need for thorough interviewer training, explained in chapter 12. A well-trained research staff is critical to the success of personal interview surveys. Well-trained staff members help encourage survey participation among sample members; draw thoughtful, relevant responses to survey questions; and produce data that are high in accuracy, reliability, and external validity. Poorly trained staff members, in contrast, are more likely to collect poor quality data and even bias survey results through their actions and statements. Problems may occur when poorly trained interviewers fail to probe inadequate answers, record respondents' answers incorrectly, ad lib questions rather than reading them as written, and behave in a way that could bias respondents' answers. The type and intensity

of interviewer training depends on the goals of the study, the number of interviewers, their previous experience, the study's time frame, and the complexity of the questionnaire, among other factors. In most training sessions, project managers attempt to communicate the goals of the study, develop basic interviewing skills, familiarize interviewers with the questionnaire and objectives for each question, and help interviewers learn to manage difficult interview situations (Warwick & Lininger, 1975).

The second aspect of personal survey administration that merits special attention is appropriate supervision. Proper training must be combined with effective supervision to contribute to a highly successful personal interview project. Field supervision takes place where training leaves off and occurs during actual data collection. The importance of field supervision is heightened in personal interview studies because data collection is decentralized; that is, interviewers necessarily are spread over a relatively broad geographic area. Some of the most critical aspects of field supervision include organizing work groups for neighborhoods or other geographic locations, arranging work assignments for research staff members, establishing production quotas for interviewers, reviewing completed work, serving as a liaison with the research office, and helping maintain a high level of commitment to the study among interviewers (Warwick & Lininger, 1975). Accomplishing these tasks requires strong organizational skills. Fowler and Mangione (1990) suggested that organizations pay attention to five critical aspects of each interviewer's work:

1. The number of interviews each interviewer conducts during a pre-determined time period
2. The number of hours each interviewer works
3. The response rate of each interviewer
4. The quality of each interviewer's completed interviews
5. The overall ability of each interviewer, including interactions with survey participants.

Given the key role of interviewers in the data-collection process and the decentralized nature of personal surveys, interviewer training and effective field supervision contribute greatly to the success of these projects.

## **Personal Interview Variations**

### *Group-Administered Surveys*

Group-administered surveys combine some of the features of personal interviews and some of the features of mail surveys. Researchers give the survey to members of a group who complete the survey individually, usually with minimal input from a survey administrator. Research staff

members typically give group-administered surveys to existing groups of people who are part of a selected sample, such as students, employees, or members of the armed forces. Sometimes, project managers recruit participants at shopping malls and take them to a vacant store location or in-mall research facility where they give them a survey. In this case, staff members typically thank respondents for their participation with a small gift, similar to mail surveys. In each case, research staff members administer the survey in a group setting.

This raises some concerns about group-administered surveys, however. Group members may feel coerced to participate, and if their anonymity is compromised, they may not answer questions honestly. In addition, most group-administered surveys require the permission of organizational management because they typically take place on organizational property. If a survey is sponsored by organizational management or if participants suspect this is the case, they may be less likely to answer questions honestly (Schutt, 1996). In addition, many preexisting groups do not lend themselves to probability-based sampling procedures. Although it is possible to use probability sampling for group-administered surveys—in particular, cluster sampling—it may be difficult for project managers to execute such sampling. When investigators do not use probability sampling, survey results generally suffer from limited reliability and external validity. Group-administered surveys have useful applications, but like all research methods, researchers must use them carefully to produce data that are accurate and reliable.

### *Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI)*

Recently, some research organizations have started conducting personal interviews with the help of laptop computers. In this form of interview, researchers typically load questionnaires directly onto a computer and participants enter their own responses to questions. Following participation, researchers upload the results to a master computer so that they can analyze the data. The main advantages of this type of personal interview is that computers aid in the standardization of survey administration and data collection and help to reduce bias resulting from participant-interviewer interactions. In addition, researchers can use CAPI when survey questions are complicated, and photographs, computer graphics, or other visual aids will help participants understand and respond correctly to questions (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

A primary drawback of CAPI is its expense. Even though the price of laptop computers has dropped considerably, the startup and maintenance costs associated with this form of personal interviewing are potentially quite high, especially when researchers need a sizeable number of computers to complete a large number of interviews. When researchers opt

for a smaller number of systems, they likely will experience delays in data collection and even higher maintenance costs.

In addition, CAPI requires participants to have at least a minimal level of computer literacy so that they can complete a questionnaire accurately, which raises concerns about the ability of researchers to use a representative sample. Even though most people now use computers on a regular basis, CAPI would potentially present researchers with difficult challenges if they were attempting to complete a general population survey.

As a final note, some researchers have raised concerns that CAPI is needlessly slow. Although this is not always the case, there is a time–cost tradeoff for researchers to consider. Using more computers reduces the time it takes researchers to collect data, but it costs more money. CAPI has clear benefits in specific interview situations and some researchers are enthusiastic about its potential, but its limitations have hindered its development as a primary form of personal interviewing to date.

### *Mall Intercept Surveys*

Mall intercept surveys, or simply mall intercepts, are a common method of collecting data in a personal interview format. Well-dressed interviewers, typically wearing matching-colored blazers and carrying clipboards, are a common sight in most malls today. Researchers also use different locations for intercept studies, including downtown areas, college campuses, and other areas that attract large numbers of people. When organizations sponsor mall intercepts, they position interviewers at strategic locations throughout a mall and orally administer a survey to shoppers. Interviewers may ask shoppers to fill out a survey in a manner similar to group-administered surveys. They also may provide an inducement for participation.

Mall intercepts offer several benefits that have made them relatively popular, particularly among market researchers. Perhaps most important, researchers can complete a study relatively quickly if necessary, and mall intercepts are inexpensive relative to other research methods. Combined, these two benefits make mall intercepts an attractive research method given the time and budgetary constraints that hinder many research projects. In addition, the method is relatively uncomplicated and provides some flexibility in data collection.

Mall intercepts have some key limitations that researchers need to consider before undertaking a project, however. Perhaps most important is that although a probability-based sampling method is possible in an intercept study, it is difficult as a practical matter. Even if researchers used a probability-based sampling method, the results would generalize to shoppers at a single location. For these reasons, researchers normally use non-probability sampling methods that, although convenient, limit the external validity and reliability of a study's findings. In addition, many shoppers

avoid mall interviews, raising further concerns about the validity and reliability of study results. Interviews typically suffer from poor interview conditions because of noise, foot traffic, and other distractions, and researchers must keep questionnaires short and to the point. Although intercept studies offer benefits in certain circumstances and are popular among research practitioners, researchers must use them carefully and remember that their results suffer from limited reliability and generalizability.

### **Personal Interview Critique**

Researchers use personal interview surveys for several reasons, many of which concern data quality. Historically, researchers conducting face-to-face surveys have achieved high response rates, which are enhanced through prenotification letters and the ability of interviewers to interact with sample members. In addition, interviewers usually can establish a strong rapport with survey participants. This provides them with an opportunity to probe respondents' answers when they are inadequate or unclear. Personal interviews may take place in sample members' homes, which allows them to consult personal records or locate other information. The home also is a comfortable interview environment and tends to make respondents less sensitive to questionnaire length. In addition, sampling frame bias is low when researchers use Census Bureau data as a basis for the sampling frame because all individuals in a population have a chance, at least in theory, of being included in the sample. As a result of these characteristics, researchers can use personal interview surveys to produce high-quality data.

Personal interview surveys also offer interviewers a high degree of flexibility in obtaining research information. One-on-one interviews lend themselves to questions requiring high degrees of depth or detail, and the interviewer can use visual aids or other interview devices as necessary. Interviewers also can explain questionnaire items that are confusing to respondents, particularly if the respondent misunderstands the intent of a question or is confused by a response category. Researchers can even estimate some information, although they should do this sparingly because of the potential to introduce error into survey results. The flexibility of one-on-one interviews also allows interviewers to use complex questionnaires with difficult skip patterns. The flexibility and quality of data produced through personal interview surveys have historically made this research method highly desirable to researchers.

Unfortunately, personal interview surveys suffer from significant drawbacks that have limited researchers' use of this survey method. Probably the greatest drawback to personal interview surveys is cost. Personal interviews generally are the most expensive survey research method. Although cost comparisons are not always available, Czaja and Blair (1996) estimated that a national personal interview survey would cost more than twice as

much as a similar telephone interview survey. These costs result from the need for field supervisors and extensive interviewer training, as well as travel expenses and other costs. In addition, personal interviews generally take longer than telephone interviewing because of logistical complexities. The administration of a personal interview survey is costly and complex when sample members are geographically dispersed. These are significant limitations given the importance of time and cost factors in many research decisions.

Another significant disadvantage in the use of personal interviews is the possibility of interviewer bias. The physical appearance, age, dress, race, sex, and verbal and nonverbal communication skills of the interviewer may influence respondents to provide answers that do not accurately reflect their feelings. In addition, participants may be hesitant to report highly personal behavior. The resulting bias ruins the reliability and generalizability of research results. A high degree of careful interviewer training and field supervision is required to avoid interviewer bias, which also contributes to survey cost and length. Finally, some samples are difficult, or even dangerous, to access for a personal interview. Busy work schedules make it difficult to schedule interviews with many adults. In other cases, sample members live in areas with high crime rates. Each of these sample members is important as potential respondents and researchers must interview them if possible, but reaching them presents a special challenge when conducting personal interview surveys.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Survey research is an indispensable part of organizations' attempts to monitor their internal and external environments, solve complex problems, and plan and evaluate communication campaigns. Despite what some have suggested, there is no best method of survey research, and the potential advantages and disadvantages of each method do not apply equally, or even at all, to every research situation. The best method for a project depends on various situation-specific factors, and because of this, project managers must consider the use of a survey research method in relation to the needs and constraints of each situation.

It is important for practitioners to understand each survey research method because of this. Practitioners serve their own interest by understanding the key issues associated with the use of one survey method over another in a research situation, as well as other critical aspects of survey implementation such as issues associated with the use of probability versus nonprobability sampling. This knowledge allows practitioners to make informed research decisions and engage in sophisticated problem-solving and campaign-management activities.

# II

## Making Research Decisions: Questionnaire Design

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### Chapter Contents

- Understanding Reliability and Validity
  - Levels of Measurement and Why They Matter
  - Types of Questions and the Information Each Type Provides
  - Ensuring Clarity and Avoiding Bias
  - Questionnaire Layout and Design
  - Handling “Don’t Know Responses”
  - Design Features That Affect Response Rate
  - Final Thoughts
- 

Writing a questionnaire seems simple. As the famous survey researcher G. W. Allport once said, “If we want to know how people feel: what they experience and what they remember, what their emotions and motives are like, and the reasons for acting as they do—why not ask them?” (Sellitz, Jahoda, Deutsch, & Cook, 1959, p. 236).

Unfortunately, just asking them is not as easy as it sounds. To avoid obtaining misleading results, questions must be clear, must elicit honest and reliable answers, and must keep the respondent interested in providing answers. The construction of questions must differ according to whether they are being read or heard, and the researchers can ask only as many questions as respondents have the time and energy to answer. It is easy to write bad questions and difficult to write good ones. Guidelines for questionnaire design typically focus on the importance of clarity, simplicity,

and objectivity. Other important considerations include making questions interesting and the questionnaire logical so that respondents feel motivated to answer carefully.

Given the myriad of details that can make or break a questionnaire, the best questionnaires often turn out to be those you would have written once it is too late and you have the answers to the one you already used. To avoid giving postsurvey regrets, questionnaires need to be pretested with attention to every detail and with members of the intended sample of respondents. Important issues to consider when writing questionnaires include the following:

- Validity and reliability concerns as they relate to the sample, the topic, and the client
- Levels of measurement and why they matter
- Ways to ensure clarity and avoid bias
- Types of questions and how the information each type provides differs
- Questionnaire layout and design to ensure logical flow and visual clarity

## UNDERSTANDING RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

What is a “fast” city? If you are the communication manager for the local chamber of commerce, would you want your city rated as “fast” or as “slow”? National and regional rankings of cities, universities, corporations, and other organizations are published all the time. Depending on your interpretation, “fast” could mean exciting or it could mean stressful. Meanwhile, “slow” could mean boring or it could mean mellow and comfortable. When *Psychology Today* published its feature on fast cities, the things that made a city fast included the length of time it took to be waited on in a bank, the speed at which people walked down the street, the number of people who wore watches, the speed with which people talked, and the rates of coronary heart disease in the city population. A ranking of 1 on this list probably would not make city leaders happy. But how can ratings based on objective data be refuted effectively (Sidebar 11.1)?

The answer is that measures need to be *valid* and *reliable*. A valid measure is one that seems to represent a particular idea in a convincing way. If people generally can agree that the things used to measure something such as a fast city are appropriate, the measures are considered valid. A reliable measure has consistency. If virtually anyone can replicate the study using the same measures and come out with similar answers, the measures are considered reliable. The fast city measures could be attacked as invalid by arguing that coronary heart disease has no relationship to bank teller speed, except perhaps for the bank teller.

## SIDEBAR II.1 Measuring a City's Pace

To see if there is any relationship between a city's characteristic pace and its rate of coronary heart disease, we looked at four indicators.

**Walking speed:** We clocked how long it took pedestrians to move 60 feet along relatively uncrowded streets. To eliminate the effects of socializing, we timed only people walking alone. We also excluded children, pedestrians with large packages or obvious physical handicaps, and window shoppers.

**Working speed:** We timed how long bank clerks took either to give change, in set denominations, for two \$20 bills or to give us two \$20 in return for change.

**Talking speed:** In each city we tape-recorded how long it took postal clerks to explain the difference between regular mail, certified mail, and insured mail. We then calculated their actual "articulation" rates by dividing the number of syllables in the response by the total time it took.

**The watch factor:** As a simple measure of concern with clock time, we counted the percentage of men and women who were wearing wrist watches.

Individually, each of these measures has its weaknesses: They all tap into special groups, not the city's general population; the second two are confounded by skill and efficiency; and the last is affected by fashion as well as concern with time.

Finally, we created an index of the overall pace of life in each city by giving the four scores equal weight and adding them together. The chart below shows how the cities ranked, from 1st to 36th, in each category.

### FAST CITIES, SLOW CITIES, HOW THEY RANK

City	Overall Pace	Walking Speed	Bank Speed	Talking Speed	Watches Worn	CHD*
Boston, MA	1	2	6	6	2	10
Buffalo, NY	2	5	7	15	4	2
New York, NY	3	5	7	15	1	1
Salt Lake City, UT	4	4	16	12	11	31
Columbus, OH	5	22	17	1	19	26
Worcester, MA	6	9	22	6	6	4
Providence, RI	7	7	9	9	19	3
Springfield, MA	8	1	15	20	22	7
Rochester, NY	9	20	2	26	7	14
Kansas City, MO	10	6	3	15	32	21
St. Louis, MO	11	15	20	9	15	8
Houston, TX	12	10	8	21	19	36
Paterson, NJ	13	17	4	11	31	1
Bakersfield, CA	14	28	13	5	17	20
Atlanta, GA	15	3	27	2	36	33

(Continues)

### SIDEBAR II.1 (Continued)

City	Overall Pace	Walking Speed	Bank Speed	Talking Speed	Watches Worn	CHD*
Detroit, MI	16	21	12	34	2	11
Youngstown, OH	17	13	18	3	30	6
Indianapolis, IN	18	18	23	8	24	22
Chicago, IL	19	12	31	3	27	13
Philadelphia, PA	20	30	5	22	11	16
Louisville, KY	21	16	21	29	15	18
Canton, OH	22	23	14	26	15	9
Knoxville, TN	23	25	24	30	11	17
San Francisco, CA	24	19	35	26	5	27
Chattanooga, TN	25	35	1	32	24	12
Dallas, TX	26	26	28	15	28	32
Oxnard, CA	27	30	30	23	7	34
Nashville, TN	28	8	26	24	33	14
San Diego, CA	29	27	34	18	9	24
East Lansing, MI	30	14	33	12	34	29
Fresno, CA	31	36	25	17	19	25
Memphis, TN	32	34	10	19	34	30
San Jose, CA	33	29	29	30	22	35
Shreveport, LA	34	32	19	33	28	19
Sacramento, CA	35	33	32	36	26	23
Los Angeles, CA	36	24	36	35	13	28

\*Lower numbers indicate faster speeds, more watches worn, higher CHD rates. CHD indicates rates of coronary heart disease, adjusted for the median age in each city. From "Type A Cities and Your Heart," by R. Levine, 1989, *Psychology Today*. Copyright 1989 by Sussex Publishers, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

For measures to be valid, the *concept* or idea they represent must be clear and the *operationalizations*, the actual measures themselves, must seem appropriate. To a great extent, determining validity is an exercise in persuasion. Reliability is easier to verify objectively.

Threats to validity and reliability sometimes are subtle, making it important to think carefully about the context in which surveys will be answered and interpreted. The measure itself must seem appropriate, and the scale used to measure it must seem appropriate. For example, operationalizing a concept such as a "livable" city might seem fairly straightforward. *U.S. News and World Report* publishes a feature on this issue every year focusing on characteristics such as crime rates, housing costs, and employment rates. Most people would agree that a more livable city would feature a lower crime rate, lower housing costs, and higher employment rates. But wait: rising housing costs make a city more attractive, not less attractive, to those investing in real estate. So a high score on housing costs could

mean less livable to some people and more livable to others. Meanwhile, some might argue that the most appropriate measure of livability would be people's perceptions of safety and satisfaction, rather than more objective measures of crime rates, numbers of parks, and so on.

Moreover, the measures chosen to operationalize livability might be criticized as insufficient to measure the concept appropriately. Perhaps factors such as average commute times, numbers of cultural events, and the quality of public schools (as indicated by standardized tests? Availability of special services?) also need to be included to provide a valid measure. The three-quarters of the population who do not have school-age children, however, may not consider public school quality a primary determinant of a city's livability. In addition, some people might consider other factors such as nearby access to parkland as critical to quality of life, whereas others might consider a booming nightlife a higher priority. And what about weather? Is a warm temperature an advantage or a disadvantage? It depends on whether you prefer to snow ski or water ski. Thus, to measure a fairly simple idea such as a livable city, the measures chosen must be the following:

- Sufficient in number to represent enough about the concept
- Appropriate as indicators of the concept
- Unambiguous, so that a high score on a measure clearly represents a high level of the concept

Reliability, too, is an important characteristic for measures, with two primary components. First, the indicator of a concept must be replicable, that is, reusable with a similar result. The second component of reliability is how consistently the various operationalizations of a concept measure it. The operationalizations are the ways the researcher measures an idea, such as by counting the number of adults employed in the community during a single year. Consistency of the measures is important because observers tend to find a group of measures more convincing than any single measure. For example, if a city that scores highly on employment rates and cultural events also scores highly on individuals' reports of perceived safety and happiness with the town, these measures as a group representing "livability" can be called reliable. Some people may think employment rates are more important than personal reports of happiness, others may consider personal reports more important, but they all may accept the others' measures if convinced that the measures "hang together" consistently. This type of reliability can be measured statistically.

Rankings such as "most livable cities" can have major repercussions for organizations that score well or poorly or just better or worse than expected. According to Monks and Ehrenberg (1999), educational institutions that receive a less favorable rating from the *U.S. News and World*

*Report* annual rankings of colleges and universities end up with a lower-quality pool of applicants and have to use bigger financial incentives to attract desirable students. As shown in Table 11.1, rankings of universities can vary dramatically depending on the methods used to develop the ranking scores. As Gater (2002) has asserted, it is nearly impossible to identify, quantify, and measure characteristics that fairly compare colleges and universities because they have wide-ranging sizes, scopes, missions, and disciplinary emphases. Nevertheless, many parents of potential students, students themselves, faculty considering potential employers, and donors considering potential beneficiaries look for rankings to help them in their decision making.

As Table 11.1 shows, rankings change depending on the types of institutions included in the analysis, how the organizations collect data about “quality” or “value,” and when they collect the data. Some raters, for example, analyze institutional-level data such as admission and graduation rates. Some include surveys of university administrators. Some include surveys of alumni or current students. In addition, some surveys rely on volunteer samples rather than representative samples. Table 11.1 shows that even the same organizations rank universities differently depending on whether they focus on a particular issue (e.g., academic excellence or cost) or include a range of issues important to most applicants (e.g., academic excellence *and* cost) in the ranking criteria. Meanwhile, other organizations may focus on criteria important only to some, such as political activism. In addition, rankings can change depending on whether they focus exclusively on schools that meet criteria for “national” universities or mix public and private colleges along with public and private universities. Communication managers at educational institutions must understand validity and reliability issues to deal effectively with these rankings, which frequently receive a great deal of news coverage and attention from important constituents. Universities that wish to publicize rankings that make them look good while de-emphasizing those that portray them less positively have to defend the validity and reliability of one survey credibly while attacking the validity and reliability of another.

## LEVELS OF MEASUREMENT AND WHY THEY MATTER

Survey questions fall into four general levels, shown in Table 11.2, that dictate how the questions can and should be analyzed. It is important to know your level of measurement because the level dictates the types of statistical tests you can perform on the data. Usually, clients hope to determine how certain beliefs or behaviors relate to other beliefs and behaviors. If measures have been collected at a low level of measurement, this will seriously limit the analyst’s ability to investigate relationships of interest.

**TABLE III.1**

Rankings of Universities Based on Varying Criteria From Different Organizations

<i>Kiplinger "Best Value" (2003)</i>	<i>Peterson's "Solid Value" (2004)</i>	<i>Peterson's "Academics Plus" (2004)</i>	<i>Mother Jones "Activist Campuses" (2003)</i>	<i>Princeton Review "Most Politically Active" (2004)</i>	<i>Princeton Review "Academic Experience" (2004)</i>	<i>U.S. News &amp; World Report "Top National Universities" (2004)</i>
1. UNC Chapel Hill	1. Barry University	1. Clemson	1. U of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez	1. Claremont McKenna College	1. U of Chicago	1. Harvard U
2. U of Virginia	2. Bryan College	2. William & Mary	2. UCLA	2. US Naval Academy	2. Marlboro College	2. Princeton U
3. College of William & Mary	3. Burlington College	3. SUNY Maritime College	3. Spelman College	3. Hampden-Sydney College	3. Reed College	3. Yale U
4. U of Georgia	4. Carson-Newman College	4. US Air Force Academy	4. California Community Colleges	4. Sarah Lawrence College	4. St. John's College (MD)	4. U of Pennsylvania
5. U of Florida	5. Centenary College of LA	5. US Military Academy	5. Rutgers U	5. Georgetown U	5. Swarthmore College	5. Duke U
6. New College of Florida	6. Eastern Mennonite U	6. UC Berkeley	6. Suffolk U	6. US Air Force Academy	6. Haverford College	6. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
7. Georgia Institute of Technology	7. Freed-Hardeman U	7. UC Irvine	7. U of Massachusetts	7. Eugene Lang College	7. St. John's College (NM)	7. Stanford U
8. U of Illinois at Urbana, Champaign	8. Lenoir-Rhyne College	8. UC San Diego	8. Mount St. Mary's U	8. Hampshire College	8. Harvey Mudd College	8. California Institute of Technology
9. Truman State University	9. Rollins College	9. UC Santa Barbara	9. Arizona State U	9. The George Washington U	9. Sarah Lawrence College	9. Columbia U
10. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State U	10. Shorter College	10. U of Mary Washington	10. UC Berkeley	10. Wesleyan College	10. Carleton College	10. Dartmouth College
<b>Sources</b>						
Peterson's database	Alumni feedback and institutional data	Alumni feedback and institutional data	Editors' analysis of news reports	Convenience- and volunteer-sample surveys of students	Combination of convenience- and volunteer-sample surveys of students, counselors, parents, and educators	Perceptions of administrators (61% response rate) and institutional data



the best one rated 1 and the worst one rated 5." It would be possible to know which publications do best and worst, but it would not be possible to know whether Publication 2 is liked a lot better than Publication 3 or just a little bit better.

The ranking question often creates problems and generally should be avoided. It not only provides information of limited use but also frequently confuses or frustrates respondents. Ranking is difficult to do and tends to discourage respondents from completing a questionnaire. Sometimes respondents may consider two or more items to be ranked in a tie, and other times they may not understand the basis on which they are supposed to determine differences. When asked to rank the corporate citizenship of a group of companies, for example, respondents may not feel they have enough information on some companies to distinguish them from others. Respondents often rate several things as the same number, rendering their response to the entire question useless to the analyst. If two or more items are tied, they no longer are ranked. The answers no longer are mutually exclusive, which makes the question of less use than even a nominal variable would be.

Organizations that want to rank a group of things may find it better to let rankings emerge from the data rather than trying to convince respondents to do the ranking themselves. They can do this by creating a question or a group of questions that can be compared with one another, such as, "Please rate each of the following information sources according to how much you like them, with a 4 indicating 'a lot,' a 3 indicating 'some,' a 2 indicating 'not much,' and a 1 indicating 'not at all.'" The mean score for each information source then can be used to create a ranking.

The third level of measurement is the *interval* level. This is the most flexible type of measure to use because it holds a lot of meaning, giving it a great deal of explanatory power and lending itself to sensitive statistical tests. As with the previous levels of measurement, the interval measure's responses must be mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and ordered. The order, however, now includes equal intervals between each possible response. For example, a survey could ask people to indicate how much they like a publication on a 10-point scale, on which 10 represents liking it the most and 1 represents liking it the least. It can be assumed that the respondent will think of the distances separating 2 and 3 as the same as the distances separating 3 and 4, and 9 and 10.

Most applied research—and some scholarly research—assumes perceptual scales such as strongly agree–strongly disagree or very important–not important at all can be considered interval-level scales. Purists disagree, saying they are ordinal because respondents might not place an equal distance between items on a scale such as *not at all . . . a little . . . some . . . a lot* in their own minds. Fortunately, statisticians have found that this usually

does not present a major problem. Nevertheless, this is a controversial issue (Sarle, 1994). Researchers must construct such measures carefully and pretest them to ensure that they adhere to the equal-distance assumption as much as possible.

The fourth level of measurement is the *ratio* scale, which is simply an interval scale that has a true zero. This means the numbers assigned to responses are real numbers, not symbols representing an idea such as "very much." Ratio scales include things such as the number of days respondents report reading the newspaper during the past week (0–7 days), the number of minutes spent reading the business section, or the level of confidence they have that they will vote in the next presidential election (0–100% likelihood of voting). This type of scale is considered the most powerful because it embodies the most meaning.

### TYPES OF QUESTIONS AND THE INFORMATION EACH TYPE PROVIDES

Various strategies exist for eliciting responses at each level of analysis. Keep in mind that respondents will find complex questions more difficult and time consuming to answer. As a result, the survey designer has to make trade-offs between obtaining the most meaningful information and obtaining any information at all. For example, a lengthy and complex mail survey may end up in the trash can more often than in the return mail. Even if the questions are terrific, the few responses that come back may not compensate for the loss of information resulting from the number of nonresponses.

Likewise, people answering a telephone survey will find complicated questions frustrating because they tend to comprehend and remember less when hearing a question than when reading a question. This is the reason telephone surveys often use generic response categories such as the Likert-scale type of response, in which the answer range is: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree. People on the telephone often have distractions in the background and other things they would rather be doing, making them less involved in the survey. This makes it easier for them to forget what a question was, what the response options were, or how they answered a previous question on the survey.

For ease of response and analysis, questions on surveys usually are closed ended, meaning respondents choose their favorite answer from a list of possibilities. Open-ended questions, which ask a query but provide space for individual answers instead of a response list, invite more information but are often skipped by respondents and are time consuming to analyze afterward. As a result, surveys typically limit the number of open-ended questions to 2 or 3 of 50. The primary types of closed-ended

questions are the checklist, ranking scale, quantity/intensity scale, Likert-type scale, frequency scale, and semantic differential scale.

### Checklists

The checklist is a nominal variable, providing categories from which respondents can choose. They can be asked to choose only one response, or all that apply.

*Checklist example:*

Please indicate whether you are male or female:

- Male     Female

Please indicate which of the following publications you have read this week (check all that apply):

- Newspapers    News magazines    Other magazines    Newsletters

### Ranking Scales

Ranking scales are ordinal variables, in which respondents are asked to put items in the order they think is most appropriate. Ranking scales are problematic because they incorporate a series of questions into a single item, requiring respondents to perform a complex and often confusing task. They must decide which choice should come first, which should come last, which comes next, and so on until the whole series of comparisons is completed.

*Ranking example:*

Please rank the following issues according to how important they are to your decision about a congressional candidate this year. Put a 1 by the issue most important to you and a 5 by the issue least important to you:

- Taxes  
 Economy  
 Environment  
 Education  
 Crime

Questionnaire designers can help respondents answer a ranking question by breaking it into a series of questions, so that the respondents do not have to do this in their heads. Although this method makes it easier for respondents to answer ranking questions, it uses a lot of valuable questionnaire space.

Among the following issues, which is the most important to your decision about a congressional candidate this year?

- Taxes
- Economy
- Environment
- Education
- Crime

Among the following issues, which is the *next most* important to your decision about a congressional candidate this year?

- Taxes
- Economy
- Environment
- Education
- Crime

Among the following issues, which is the least important to your decision about a congressional candidate this year?

- Taxes
- Economy
- Environment
- Education
- Crime

### Quantity/Intensity Scales

The quantity/intensity scale is an ordinal- or interval-level variable, in which respondents choose a location that best fits their opinion on a list of options that forms a continuum.

*Quantity/intensity example:*

How much education have you completed?

- Less than high school degree
- High school diploma or GED
- Some college (no degree; may be currently enrolled)
- Vocational certificate or associate's degree
- College graduate (bachelor's degree)
- Some graduate work (no degree)
- Master's or other graduate professional degree
- Doctoral degree

### Likert-Type Scale

The most frequently used scale is known as the Likert scale.

*Likert scale example:*

Please indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement:

The Bestever Corporation is responsive to public concerns

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Other variations on the Likert scale appear frequently on questionnaires. Some popular response ranges include the following:

- Very satisfied/Somewhat satisfied/Somewhat dissatisfied/Very unsatisfied
- Strongly oppose/Oppose/Support/Strongly support
- Very familiar/Somewhat familiar/Somewhat unfamiliar/Very unfamiliar
- A lot/Somewhat/Not much/Not at all
- A lot/Some/A little/None
- Always/Frequently/Seldom/Never
- Often/Sometimes/Rarely/Never
- Excellent/Good/Fair/Poor

**Quantity/Intensity example:**

Please indicate if the following reasons have been *very important* (VI), *somewhat important* (SI), *not very important* (NVI), or *not at all important* (NAI) to your decision whether to give to the Most important Association in the past.

The tax benefits resulting from giving	VI	SI	NVI	NAI
Because you like being involved with the MA	VI	SI	NVI	NAI

Another variation of the Likert scale is known as the *feeling thermometer*, which can be modified to measure levels of confidence, degrees of involvement, and other characteristics. The feeling thermometer as presented by Andrews and Withey (1976) used 10- or 15-point increments ranging from 0 to 100 to indicate respondents' warmth toward a person, organization, or idea.

*Feeling thermometer example:*

100 Very warm or favorable feeling

85 Good warm or favorable feeling

70 Fairly warm or favorable feeling

- 60 A bit more warm or favorable than cold feeling
- 50 No feeling at all
- 40 A bit more cold or unfavorable feeling
- 30 Fairly cold or unfavorable feeling
- 15 Quite cold or unfavorable feeling
- 0 Very cold or unfavorable feeling

Yet another variation of the Likert scale uses pictorial scales, which can be useful for special populations such as children, individuals lacking literacy, or populations with whom language is a difficulty. Often, the scales range from a big smiley face (very happy or positive) to a big frowny face (very unhappy or negative), or from a big box (a lot) to a little box (very little).

### Frequency Scales

The frequency scale is an interval or ratio scale. Instead of assessing how much a respondent embraces an idea or opinion, the frequency question ascertains how often the respondent does or thinks something.

*Frequency example:*

How many days during the past week have you watched a local television news program?

- 7 days
- 6 days
- 5 days
- 4 days
- 3 days
- 2 days
- 1 day
- 0 days

About how many times have you visited a shopping mall during the past month?

- 16 times or more
- 11–15 times
- 6–10 times
- 1–5 times
- 0 times

Sometimes frequency scales are constructed in ways that make it unclear whether equal distances exist between each response category, which makes the meaning of the measure less clear and the assumption of interval-level statistical power questionable.

*Frequency example:*

In the past 6 months, how many times have you done the following things?

	Never	1–2 times total	3–4 times a month	1–3 times a month	1 time a week	More than once a week
Been offered an alcoholic beverage						
Attended a party where alcohol was served						
Drank an alcoholic beverage						
Had four or more drinks in a row						
Rode with a driver who had been drinking alcohol						
Got sick from drinking alcohol						

**Semantic Differential Scales**

The semantic differential scale is an interval-level variable, on which respondents locate themselves on a scale that has labeled end points. The number of response categories between the end points is up to the questionnaire’s designer, but it is useful to have at least four response options. More options make it possible for respondents to indicate nuances of opinion; beyond a certain point, which depends on the context, a proliferation of categories becomes meaningless or even confusing. An even number of response categories forces respondents to choose a position on the issue or refuse to answer the question, whereas an odd number of response categories enables respondents to choose the neutral (midpoint) response.

*Semantic differential example:*

Please rate your most recent experience with the Allgetwell Hospital staff:

Incompetent	-----	Competent
Impolite	-----	Polite
Helpful	-----	Unhelpful

Semantic differential questions can provide a lot of information in a concise format. Written questionnaires especially can include a list of semantic differential items to assess the performance of an organization and its communication activities. Because this type of question includes information as part of the answer categories themselves, some consider these

items more valid than Likert-scale items. For example, a Likert-scale question asking if the staff seemed competent could bias respondents who do not want to disagree with the statement, whereas a semantic differential question that gives equal emphasis to “competent” and “incompetent” as end points may elicit more honest answers. Psychologists have demonstrated that agree/disagree question batteries can suffer from acquiescence (Warwick & Lininger, 1975, p. 146), which occurs when people hesitate to express disagreement.

### Measuring Knowledge

Often, an organization wants to determine what people know about a topic. One option is to give a true/false or multiple-choice test. The advantage of the multiple-choice test is that, if carefully written, it can uncover misperceptions as well as determine the number of people who know the correct answers. The wrong answers, however, must be plausible. A second option is to ask open-ended questions in which people must fill in the blanks. This requires a lot of work from the respondent but potentially provides the most valid answers. A third option is to ask people how much they feel they know, rather than testing them on what they actually know. This technique seems less intimidating to respondents. Finally, follow-up questions can ask people how sure they are of a particular answer.

## ENSURING CLARITY AND AVOIDING BIAS

Wording can affect the way people respond to survey questions. As a result, it is important to pretest for clarity, simplicity, and objectivity. Using standardized questions that have been pretested and used successfully can help prevent problems. Of course, because every communication issue has unique characteristics, standardized batteries of questions suffer from lacking specific context. Often, a combination of standard and unique items serve the purpose well. When designing questions, keep the following principles in mind:

1. *Use words that are simple, familiar to all respondents, and relevant to the context.* Technical jargon and colloquialisms usually should be avoided. At times, however, the use of slang may enhance the relevance of a questionnaire to a resistant target public. For example, asking college students how often they “prefunk” could elicit more honest responses than asking them how often they “use substances such as alcohol before going out to a social function,” which is both wordy and could have a more negative connotation to the students than their own terminology. When using specialized terms, it is important to pretest them to ensure the respondents understand them and interpret them as intended. Try to choose words that

will not seem patronizing, class specific, or region specific. Choosing to ask about “pasta” instead of “noodles” when assessing audience responses to messages about an Italian restaurant could alienate some respondents who think “pasta” seems pretentious.

2. *Aim for precision to make sure the meaning of answers will be clear.* Avoid vague terms. For example, the word often may mean once a week to some people and twice a day to others. *Recently* could mean “this past week” or “this past year.” Terms such as here and there do not set clear geographic parameters.

Do not leave room for interpretation. People responding to a question about how often in the past year they have donated to a charitable organization may consider each monthly contribution to a church a separate donation. The sponsor of the survey, however, may have intended for respondents to indicate to how many different organizations they have made donations during the past year. Avoid hypothetical questions because people often are not very good at, or may have trouble being honest about, predicting their own behavior. Direct questions about cause or solutions also may be difficult for respondents to answer validly (Fowler, 1995). It is better to let the reasons for things emerge from the data analysis by looking at the associations between attitudes and behaviors instead of asking respondents to make those associations for the researcher.

Finally, because the use of negatives in a question can result in confusion, use positive or neutral statements, providing respondents with the opportunity to disagree. For example, instead of asking, “Do you think the Neverong Corporation should not change its partner benefits policy?” a survey can ask, “Do you think the Neverong Corporation’s partner benefits policy should change or stay the same?”

3. *Check for double-barreled questions.* Each question must cover only one issue. Asking if respondents rate staff as “polite and efficient,” for example, makes it impossible for respondents to choose “polite but inefficient” or “impolite but efficient” as their answer. Sometimes a double-barreled question is subtle, and the problem occurs because a phrase requires respondents to embrace an assumption they may not hold. For example, asking “How likely are you to use this service on your next visit to Funpark?” assumes there will be a next visit.

4. *Check for leading or loaded questions.* A leading question prompts the respondent in one direction instead of treating each possible response equally. Asking the question, “How much did you enjoy your visit?” leads respondents in the direction of a positive answer, whereas the question, “How would you rate your visit?” allows enjoyment and disappointment to be equivalent answer categories, making it easier for respondents to choose the negative answer.

A loaded question biases the answer through the use of emotionally charged words, stereotypes, or other words that give a subtle charge to a

phrase. Loading can occur in the question or in the answer. For example, the question given earlier asking respondents to indicate which issues are most important to them in an upcoming election mentions only some of the possible alternatives about which voters may care. Health care, abortion, social security, welfare, agricultural issues, and race/gender equality are among the many issues not even mentioned. In addition, loading can occur by using words that have positive or negative connotations, such as “unwed moms” versus “single mothers.” Loading also can occur in frequency scales. Asking people whether they had 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 or more alcoholic drinks during the past week, for example, gets more people to acknowledge having 3 or 4 drinks than asking people whether they had 0, 1, 2, 3 or more alcoholic drinks during the past week (Fowler, 1995). People often feel marginalized by picking what seems like an extreme response.

5. *Check for social desirability effects.* Some people find it difficult to express an opinion or report a behavior they think is inconsistent with what most other people think or do. Some also find it difficult to give a response they think the surveyor disagrees with or disapproves of. It is well documented, for example, that a higher percentage of people claim to have voted in an election than actually turn out at the polls. Try to write questions so that people find it easy to give a negative response.

One technique for reducing social desirability bias is to include an introduction to a sensitive question that makes any response seem normal and acceptable. For example, Fowler (1995) noted that asking people if they own a library card can seem threatening because a “no” response could be perceived as a lack of interest in reading, which might seem socially unacceptable. As a result, Fowler suggested the following introduction: “Many people get books from libraries. Others buy their books, subscribe to magazines, or get their reading material in some other way. Do you have a library card now, or not?” (p. 36).

6. *Provide enough context to enable people to respond realistically or remember accurately.* On the whole, questions should be as brief as possible so that they can be digested with the least effort. Nevertheless, the goal of questionnaire design is to construct questions such that answers will provide the most meaningful information possible. As a result, adding some context can be useful. It helps, for example, to ask people to recall behaviors over a limited time or from a recent time, such as during the past week.

In general, questionnaire designers must avoid yes/no items. Besides providing information of limited usefulness for statistical analysis (dichotomous questions are nominal variables), this type of question leaves no room for a respondent to answer “maybe” or “well, it depends.” Answers to dichotomous questions, as a result, can be misleading. Similarly, questions usually need to avoid “always” and “never” as categories. “Almost always” and “almost never” give people the opportunity to be more context specific.

## QUESTIONNAIRE LAYOUT AND DESIGN

Most discussions of survey design focus on how to construct the questions themselves, but other aspects of design, such as how items appear on a page or the order in which questions appear, also can make a difference to respondents.

### Ease of Reading

It helps to give respondents “chunks” of questions at a time. A series of questions without a break can become boring and confusing. People may get lost in a written questionnaire that has 10 items in a row, for example, checking off their responses to Question 6 on the line for Question 5. Assessing respondents’ interest in different types of university-related news, for example, is difficult to follow in a continuous format.

The following are topics that might be covered in a publication from Central State University. For each one, please tell me whether you are *very interested* (VI), *somewhat interested* (SI), *not very interested* (NVI), or *not at all interested* (NAI) in receiving information about each topic\*:

- |  |    |    |     |     |       |
|--|----|----|-----|-----|-------|
| 1. The university’s branch campuses      | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 2. Student accomplishments               | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 3. The financial needs of the university | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 4. The work of the administration        | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 5. How donations are being used          | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 6. News about teaching                   | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 7. Athletic accomplishments              | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 8. News about university research        | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 9. University nostalgia and history      | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 10. News about alumni                    | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 11. News about campus life               | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
- \*RF/DK = refused or don’t know.

Questions are easier to answer in chunks. Generally, chunks of three or four items at a time work well.

The following topics that might be covered in a publication from Central State University. For each one, please tell me whether you are *very interested*, *somewhat interested*, *not very interested*, or *not at all interested* in receiving information about each topic\*:

- |   |    |    |     |     |       |
|---|----|----|-----|-----|-------|
| 12. The university’s branch campuses      | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 13. Student accomplishments               | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 14. The financial needs of the university | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 15. The work of the administration        | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 16. How donations are being used          | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 17. News about teaching                   | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |

- |                                      |    |    |     |     |       |
|--------------------------------------|----|----|-----|-----|-------|
| 18. Athletic accomplishments         | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 19. News about university research   | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 20. University nostalgia and history | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 21. News about alumni                | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
| 22. News about campus life           | VI | SI | NVI | NAI | RF/DK |
- \* RF/DK = refused or don't know.

Respondents on a telephone survey also can become fatigued by a long list of items and will benefit from a break during which the surveyor gives a new introduction, even if the questions in the next section do not focus on anything new.

Example from a phone survey:

OK, now I need to know if you [READ SLOWLY] *strongly agree* (SA), *agree* (A), *disagree* (D), or *strongly disagree* (SD) with each of the following statements about politics and the media.\* [REPEAT CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY.]

- |  | (5) | (4) | (3) | (2) | (1) | (9)   |
|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| 19. The media rarely have anything new to say.   | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |
| 20. I'm interested in campaigns and election information.                                | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |
| 21. The news media only pay attention to bad news about political issues and candidates. | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |
| 22. Candidates for office are interested only in people's votes, not in their opinions.  | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |
| 23. My vote makes a difference.  | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |

This won't take much longer and we really appreciate your help. These next few questions also are about politicians and the media. Do you *strongly agree* (SA), *agree* (A), *disagree* (D), or *strongly disagree* (SD) that:

- |   | (5) | (4) | (3) | (2) | (1) | (9)   |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| 24. Politicians are out of touch with life in the real world.               | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |
| 25. I pay attention to campaign and election information.                   | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |
| 26. There's often more to the story than you hear in the news.              | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |
| 27. Political campaigns are too mean spirited.                              | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |
| 28. I actively seek out information concerning the government and politics. | SA  | A   | n   | D   | SD  | RF/DK |

29. I have a say in what the government does. SA A n D SD RF/DK

\* n = neutral; RF/DK = refused or don't know.

It also is important to remember how easily people answering telephone surveys can get lost. Because they do not see the questions, they can forget what a series of questions is about or what the response options are. In addition, changing response options frequently will slow them down and may make it difficult for them to keep track of what they are supposed to be doing. Forcing them to slow down can help improve the validity of answers by making sure they think carefully about their answers, but it also can hurt validity by causing utter confusion. Pretesting, over the phone, is essential.

### Clarity of Graphics

Recent work by Christian and Dillman (2004) has shown that respondents to self-administered surveys pick up important cues from the visual design of survey questions and answers. For example, Christian and Dillman demonstrated that respondents become confused if a scale is broken up into two columns instead of being presented in a single row or in a single column.

*Clear:*

Overall, how would you rate the quality of education that you are getting at WSU?

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

*More confusing:*

Overall, how would you rate the quality of education that you are getting at WSU?

- Excellent     Good     Poor
- Very Good     Fair

### Directionality and Response Set

Another issue that can affect validity is known as *directionality* and refers to the order in which response categories are presented. It helps both

respondents and analysts to associate negative opinions with lower numbers and positive opinions with larger numbers. Some questionnaires, for example, ask respondents to choose a numbered response instead of checking a box. This can make a questionnaire easier to read—it makes the middle of a scale more obvious—and it also makes data entry easier because the computer usually has to receive numbers.

*Example of numbered responses on a written survey:*

How important are the following for helping you choose your preferred candidates or issues?

	Not at all important							Very important							
Newspapers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7								
Radio	1	2	3	4	5	6	7								
Television	1	2	3	4	5	6	7								
Magazines	1	2	3	4	5	6	7								
Friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7								
Family	1	2	3	4	5	6	7								

Questionnaire designers also need to pretest for response set, which is a form of response bias. If response categories always have the negative response first (on the left if on a written questionnaire) and the positive response last (on the right), people may begin to answer questions too quickly, without thinking them through. Response set can make a group of questions seem related simply because they appear near each other on the questionnaire. In other words, people may have marked similar answers on the questions out of convenience or habit, instead of because they thought deeply about each question and agreed that a similar answer applied to each.

### Using “Skip Patterns” Effectively

Sometimes a question will not apply to all respondents. In this case a screening question, or a series of screening questions, is used. This series of questions is known as a *skip pattern*. On a written questionnaire, it is important to make it clear when and which questions should be skipped. Often instructions such as “GO TO Q. 6” appear next to the appropriate response to the screening question. Sometimes, questionnaires include graphic elements such as boxes or arrows to guide respondents. Such devices can make a questionnaire look cluttered and confusing, however, so skip patterns need to be pretested carefully. Christian and Dillman (2004) found that directional arrows help prevent confusion, as does placing instructions

to skip a question if it does not apply *before* the response options instead of after them. Their example looked something like this:

*Clear:*

A. Have one-on-one meetings with professors contributed significantly to your WSU education?

If you haven't had many one-on-one meetings, just skip to Question 9.

Yes

No

*Confusing:*

A. Have one-on-one meetings with professors contributed significantly to your WSU education?

Yes

No

If you haven't had many one-on-one meetings, just skip to Question 9.

## HANDLING "DON'T KNOW" RESPONSES

One subtle but major issue in the use of surveys is how to handle people who do not have an opinion on a particular question. One of the problems with survey research is that most people do try to offer an opinion for the researchers, even if they must manufacture an opinion on the spot. For example, the average American respondent queried about the economic situation in Mozambique probably knows little about Mozambique's economy, unless it has been in the news. Few people knew much about Kosovo until Slobodan Milosevic decided to "ethnically cleanse" the province. Nevertheless, if asked for an opinion many people offer one, even though some may decline to answer the question. Such opinions, based on little or no information, mean little because they are unstable. They are pseudo-data, not real data.

Researchers must be ready to handle respondents' potential lack of opinion. The most common way is to include a "don't know" response among the answer categories. The drawback of making it easily available is that respondents may be tempted to use it. Making it subtly available is easy to do on a telephone survey because the interviewer can be instructed not to read that option. On a written survey, the respondents will see the option if it is available. Respondents will use the "don't know" option for one of two reasons: either they truly do not know, or they do not feel like answering the question. To prod people who are not motivated to think about an issue to report an opinion, even if it is top of the mind, surveyors eliminate the

“don’t know” option, forcing respondents to leave the question entirely blank if they do not want to answer it.

It is important to consider two issues here. The first is that “don’t know” can be a meaningful response, of great usefulness to the communication manager. For example, if a large proportion of participants respond “don’t know” to a question about corporate reputation, the organization can conclude that it does not have a bad reputation even if it does not have a good reputation. In other words, the company may learn that instead of running a persuasion campaign, it needs to launch an awareness campaign. This frequently is the case, but organizations must be skilled at collecting and interpreting “don’t know” responses to make the appropriate diagnosis.

Another important issue about “don’t know” responses is that “don’t know” cannot be interpreted the same way as “neutral.” Likert scales, for example, often feature a neutral category, which can tempt people to avoid taking a position on an issue. Nevertheless, “neutral” does not necessarily mean the respondent lacks information on which to base an opinion. A neutral opinion is an opinion. Responding “neutral” to a question about providing child care in the workplace, for instance, may mean “I don’t care; this doesn’t affect me,” or “I am satisfied either way,” rather than “I have no information on which to base an opinion.” Both options can be made available to respondents to avoid misinterpreting the findings. Another way to handle the possibility of “don’t know” responses is to provide information in the introduction to a question that gives the respondent background on which to base an opinion. This has important advantages and disadvantages. For example, three members of the state legislature in Washington state included the following questions on a survey of their constituents:

About 9 in 10 Washington voters in a recent nonpartisan survey said education was their number one issue this year. About 2 in 3 people surveyed said education was underfunded and worse than it was 4 years ago. How would you address this?

Divert funding from other areas of state government and put it into higher education?

YES NO

Increase enrollment and on-campus opportunities at our state’s colleges and universities?

YES NO

Increase enrollment opportunities at branch campuses?

YES NO

Increase the number of courses available to students at off-campus sites via television, e-mail, and the Internet?

YES NO

Build more classrooms, laboratories, and other facilities for off-campus instruction?

YES NO

The value of this strategy is that it gives a client the opportunity to see how respondents will react to an issue of emerging importance, about which they may not yet know much. This can help the client respond to the issue effectively.

The risk associated with this strategy is that it can bias the question in the direction of the information selected for inclusion. Some organizations do this intentionally on bogus questionnaires sent out as fund-raising appeals or to attract media attention through “created” opinion. This is a blatantly unethical practice that is denounced by the American Association of Public Opinion Researchers, and it violates the principles of the PRSA code of professional ethics (Sidebar 11.2).

## SIDEBAR II.2

### PUSH POLLS

(Not to be confused with legitimate polling)

#### What is a push poll?

- A push poll is an insidious form of negative campaigning disguised as a political poll that is designed to change opinions, not measure them.

#### How do push polls differ from legitimate political polls?

- Legitimate polls measure existing opinion among representative samples of the public and voters.
- Push polls contact large numbers of voters in order to change their opinions.
- Legitimate polls accurately describe candidate characteristics in order to understand voter reactions.
- Push polls frequently distort candidate characteristics in order to influence voters.
- Push polls go beyond the ethical boundaries of political polling and bombard voters with problematic statements about candidates in an effort to manufacture negative voter attitudes.

For example, push polls mostly ask questions like:

*“Would you be more or less likely to vote for (NAME OF RIVAL CANDIDATE) if you knew he had avoided the draft / falsified his resume / been arrested / gone through bankruptcy / patronized prostitutes / failed to pay child support / failed to pay income taxes?”*

(Continues)

**SIDEBAR II.2 (Continued)****How do you spot a push poll?**

- The organizations conducting these “polls” are not usually recognized as professional pollsters.
- Push polls typically call thousands of people. The people called are not a representative sample of voters. Instead, they’re people who are targeted because they’re thought to be undecided voters or supporters of a rival candidate.
- The truth of the questions is stretched or fabricated.
- Usually people’s answers are not tabulated; the intent is to create a negative effect on potential voters.

**What is the position of the American Association for Public Opinion Research on push polls?**

- AAPOR Councils have repeatedly warned members and the public about the iniquity of push polls.
- The 1996 and 2000 Councils issued formal condemnations of push polls.
- AAPOR has reacted to complaints about suspected push polls and made investigations.
- AAPOR urges its members and the media to uncover push-polling and help us alert the public.

**How can you help in combating push polls?**

- Attempt to get the name and location of the organization doing the “interviewing.”
- Ask about the sponsors, the number of people called, the questions asked, and how the information from the poll is being used.
- Contact AAPOR at [AAPOR-info@goAMP.com](mailto:AAPOR-info@goAMP.com).

Some organizations do this in hopes of educating the public; the problem is that only a small sample of the public is answering the survey. Surveys are opportunities to gather unbiased information to guide a campaign. Still others use them to see if providing certain information on a survey can change people’s responses. This type of survey is known as a “push poll” and often is used by political campaigns. Not only is the information provided on such “surveys” biased in favor of the sponsoring candidate but also the survey often ends with a fund-raising appeal. Turning surveys into vehicles for persuasion and fund-raising defeats the purpose of collecting objective data and compromises the reputation of surveyors trying to do authentic research. It is no wonder, with such unethical practices going on, that a declining number of people agree to answer market research (or any other) surveys.

## DESIGN FEATURES THAT AFFECT RESPONSE RATE

Every survey requires an introduction to inform respondents of the study's purpose. The introduction also represents an opportunity to motivate respondents to cooperate. Mail surveys and telephone surveys have different introductions, specially suited to the context. Nevertheless, the primary information to include in an introduction remains the same and includes the following:

- What the study is about
- Who the sponsor is
- How the results will be used
- Why respondents should be a part of the study (how they were chosen and why they should care about this)
- The extent to which their responses will be confidential or anonymous.

Anonymous means that no one, including the researchers, will know respondents' identities. *Confidential* means that the researchers will have identifying information for some purpose, such as matching respondents from the same household or calling back to gather more information later, but their identities will be kept secret from everyone else. Some organizations have "human subjects committees" or "institutional review boards" that must approve of study materials and may require additional elements as well.

### The Mail Survey Introduction

Mail surveys must have a cover letter introducing the study. It should be brief (never longer than one page), on letterhead (to identify the sponsoring institution and lend credibility to the study), include a contact person for questions or concerns, indicate how long the survey will take to fill out (be honest), and make it clear how to return the questionnaire (providing a self-addressed, stamped, return envelope is essential). The respondents must be thanked for cooperating and told how important their participation is. It also helps to give respondents a deadline for returning the questionnaire, of no more than a week, so that they do not forget about it. Finally, the letter may include information about an incentive provided for cooperating with the study.

### The Telephone Survey Introduction

Introductions by telephone need to be even shorter than those by letter. If possible, keep the introduction to two sentences. In those two sentences,

identify the sponsor and the purpose of the study, the way respondents have been selected, the length of time required for answering the survey, and the importance of the respondent's part in the study. It also helps to have the callers identify themselves by name so that respondents do not think the caller has anything to hide. At the end of the introduction, proceed directly to the first question on the survey. Do not ask permission to begin explicitly because this invites participants to tell you that you have called at an inconvenient time. Instead, solicit their permission to begin through the explanation of the survey and the assurance that their answers are important. This introduction makes it obvious that you plan to ask questions and that you hope they will answer. Because they probably will be skeptical of your motives and more interested in whatever they were doing before you called, you want to get right to the first question on the survey to gain their confidence and capture their interest. You want to make the first question nonthreatening, general, and interesting so that the respondents will think the questionnaire is easy and worth their time (Sidebar 11.3).

Nuances can make a difference. For example, identifying the organization at the outset gives the project more credibility and can make it clear that this is not a sales call. In addition, calling the project a *study* instead of a *survey* makes it sound less threatening and makes it clear that this will be not be one of those sales calls masquerading as a survey. In addition, saying you have called them long distance (if you really are) or that your study is being sponsored by a university or respected institution can make their selection and the study itself seem more special (Dillman, 2000).

### Prenotification Cards or Letters

The use of prenotification cards to tell respondents that a survey will be happening soon helps boost response rates. If they understand the purpose

#### SIDEBAR II.3

##### A Standard Telephone Introduction With a Screening Question

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm calling long distance from \_\_\_\_\_. We're conducting a study of \_\_\_\_\_ and I have a few questions for a registered voter 18 years of age or older.

Are you registered to vote?

[IF YES: BEGIN SURVEY. **DO NOT STOP TO ASK PERMISSION TO BEGIN.**]

[IF NO: Is someone else in your household registered to vote? May I speak with that person please? **BEGIN AGAIN WITH NEW RESPONDENT.**]

IF NO: Thanks for your time. Good-bye.

of the study ahead of time, they will be less likely to throw away an envelope that looks like a direct mail solicitation or to hang up on a call from an individual who sounds like a telephone solicitor. Letters or postcards both suffice, but postcards offer the advantage of being readable at a glance and less costly to mail. Envelopes may go unopened into the trash.

### **Follow-up Mailings**

Most mail surveys achieve a wide-ranging 5% to 40% response rate with a single mailing (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Research has found, however, that reminders can boost response rates to 75% or better. It may take four reminders to achieve a 75% return, with each reminder netting fewer responses. As a result, the research manager needs to decide the extent to which the cost of reminders is worth the additional responses. Generally, each reminder garners half the number of responses that the previous mailing achieved. As a result, a single reminder can increase a 30% response rate to a 45% response rate or a 40% response rate to a 60% response rate.

### **Incentives**

It is difficult to give telephone respondents a concrete reward for their participation, although credit card companies have tried promising a bonus credited to the respondent's account in return for answering a survey. Mail surveys, however, frequently include incentives. Usually the incentive is provided ahead of time to motivate the person to respond, instead of afterward as a reward. Monetary incentives ranging from a penny to \$5 are especially popular, with amounts over \$10 rare. Other incentives can include a gift certificate or product samples. Organizations sometimes promise donations to a charity in hopes of appealing to respondents' sense of altruism, as illustrated in Figure 11.1. Questionnaires returned in person can include a raffle ticket that can be deposited in a separate container alongside the questionnaire container to preserve the anonymity of the questionnaire.

### **Sensitive Questions**

Sensitive questions should never appear at the beginning of a survey. Instead, the most sensitive questions come at the end so that respondents who may quit the study because of a particularly offensive question will already have answered most of the questionnaire. This is why demographic questions almost always appear at the end of a survey. Many people especially dislike identifying their income levels, ethnic background, and age.

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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General Manager

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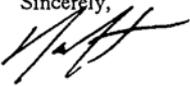
**DOWJONES**

Dear Wall Street Journal Subscriber,

We would like to better understand your business news and financial information needs. Would you please complete this brief survey about your use of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL and your professional and personal interests? Your answers will help us do a better job of developing products and services that meet your needs.

For your convenience, we have provided a postage-paid envelope in which to return this survey. As a token of our appreciation we have enclosed a dollar bill, which may brighten the day of a child you know. We appreciate your willingness to participate in this survey and thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



General Manager

P.S. Occasionally, a select group of Wall Street Journal advertisers wish to make special offers (such as discounted services or previews of new products) specifically to subscribers who respond to this survey. Please check this box if you *do not* wish to receive any of these offers:

---

FIG. 11.1. Sample cover letter with incentive. Used with permission from *The Wall Street Journal*. Copyright © *The Wall Street Journal*.

## Encouragement

Because respondents to telephone surveys cannot see the questionnaire, they will be worrying about how long the interruption will take. If the questionnaire seems to go on too long, they will lose interest. As a result, it helps to thank them every so often for continuing, as well as assuring them that the end will come soon. For example, one phone survey about the media and politics includes the phrase, around Question 23, "This won't take much longer and we really appreciate your help. These next few questions. . . ." Then, anticipating increasing impatience from the respondent, the survey includes more encouragement at Question 30, "I have just a few more questions about your use of the media. . ." before beginning the introduction for the next set of questions. Before the demographic questions

at the end of the survey, a last bit of encouragement ensures respondents that these are the final set of queries.

### **Response Set**

When constructing a questionnaire, it is important to scatter questions that measure a concept instead of clustering them together. The reason for this is that people's answers can suffer from *response set*, which means they answer a set of questions similarly because they are answering too quickly or not thoughtfully enough rather than because they think similarly about each question in the set. Response set can make measures look statistically reliable but can render them meaningless or invalid. When commissioning a survey from a research firm, managers should make sure the outfit's findings provide both reliable and meaningful information.

### **Length**

No perfect length exists for a questionnaire, although a good bit of research focuses on the topic. For example, people seem more likely to participate in a mall-intercept survey limited to a 5" × 8" card. It is difficult to keep people on the phone longer than 5 to 8 minutes, which means a telephone survey of more than 40 to 50 questions will suffer from attrition as people begin to hang up. Questions appearing at the end of the survey will end up with a smaller sample of responses than questions appearing at the beginning of the survey. In mail surveys, a longer mail survey will receive less cooperation than a shorter survey, but the number of pages is not always the deciding factor. For example, respondents may prefer the ease of reading and feeling of accomplishment that comes from having fewer questions and more white space, even if that necessitates using more pages. Some survey designers find a two-column format makes questionnaires more reader friendly. Disagreement exists about the use of single-sided versus double-sided printing. Double-sided printing cuts the number of pages but can confuse respondents, who may end up accidentally skipping pages. As with everything else, it helps to pretest surveys using different formats to see which works the best.

### **Interviewer Directions**

Untrained or confused interviewers can ruin a survey. Interviewers must sound enthusiastic, polite, and confident. They also need to present questions clearly, which means they need to enunciate carefully and speak slowly. To prevent interviewer bias from affecting the validity of the responses, they need to present the surveys in a consistent way. As a result, interviewer directions must be clear. Chapter 12 discusses interviewer training in some detail.



**English** IF YOU HAVE TROUBLE UNDERSTANDING THE MATERIALS, OR IF YOU NEED HELP FINDING HEALTH CARE, YOU CAN CALL HEALTHY MOTHERS, HEALTHY BABIES AT 1-800-322-2588. WHEN YOU CALL, TELL THE PERSON THE NAME OF YOUR LANGUAGE AND STAY ON THE LINE UNTIL YOU ARE CONNECTED WITH AN INTERPRETER.

**Amharic** ከዚህ አሁን ወስን ያልቻሉት ሃሳብ ካለ ወይም የህክምና አገልግሎት ካስፈልጋችሁ፣ ጤናማ እና ተገቢ ህክምና (ጊዜያዊ ግዢ፣ ጊዜያዊ ቤብ) በጣም የሚታወቀውን የህክምና ክፍል በ 1-800-322-2588 በጤናዎ ላይ ጥያቄ ያላችሁ። በጥያቄው ላይ ለምትገኙት ለውጥ የሚገባውን ስም ላይ ገልጿል፣ እስተርጓሚ ሊያዘጋጁላችሁ ይሰጣል የስልጠና መስመር በጤናዎ ላይ።

**Cambodian** បើលោកអ្នកមានការពិបាកយល់នូវសម្ភារៈទាំងឡាយ ឬក៏ត្រូវការជំនួយក្នុងការស្វែងរកមន្ត្រីព្យាបាលជម្ងឺ លោកអ្នកអាចទូរស័ព្ទទៅផ្នែក Healthy Mothers និង Healthy Babies តាមរយៈលេខ 1-800-322-2588 ។ នៅពេលលោកអ្នកទូរស័ព្ទមក សូមប្រាប់អ្នក លើកទូរស័ព្ទនូវភាសាដែលលោកអ្នកចង់ ឃើញ ឬចង់ទាក់ទងនឹងសេវាសុខភាពស្ត្រី។

**Chinese** 如果您無法完全理解這些資料，或者您需要幫助尋找醫療保健服務，請打電話至“健康母親 - 健康寶寶”熱線 (Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies)，號碼是 1-800-322-2588。當您打電話時，請告訴接線員您說什麼語言，並請耐心等待直到接線員將您與一位翻譯接通。

**Korean** 만약 귀하에서 자료를 이해하시는데 문제가 있거나 건강관리자를 찾는데 도움이 필요하시면 무료 전화인 1-800-322-2588 건강한 엄마, 건강한 아기 (Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies)도 전화를 하십시오. 전화를 하실 때 전화 받는 분에게 귀하가 사용하시는 언어를 말씀하시고 통역원과의 연결이 될 때 까지 전화를 들고 계십시오.

**Laotian** ຖ້າທ່ານວ່າທ່ານມີບັນຫາບໍ່ເຂົ້າໃຈຄຳອະທິບາຍ ຫລືທ່ານຕ້ອງການຄວາມຊ່ວຍເຫລືອຫາບ່ອນຮັບການປິ່ນປົວ ທ່ານອາດຈະໂທໄປຫາ ໂຄງການແນະນຳແບບແກ້ໄຂບັນຫາ (Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies) ຢູ່ເສັ້ນໂທ 1-800-322-2588 ເພື່ອ ທ່ານໄດ້ໂທໄປຫາຄວາມຊ່ວຍເຫລືອສູນຄຸ້ມຄອງສາຍວ່າທ່ານຢາກພາສາຫຍັງແລ້ວວ່າກໍ່ຈົນເຖິງມີພາສາສາມາດຮັບສາມ.

**Russian** ЕСЛИ У ВАС ТРУДНОСТИ В ПОНИМАНИИ МАТЕРИАЛА, ИЛИ ВАМ ТРЕБУЕТСЯ ПОМОЩЬ В ПОИСКЕ МЕДИЦИНСКОГО ОБЕСПЕЧЕНИЯ, ТО ВЫ МОЖЕТЕ ПОЗВОНИТЬ «ХЕЛСИ МАЭРС, ХЕЛСИ БЭЙБИС» ПО ТЕЛ 1-800-322-2588. КОГДА ВЫ ЗВОНИТЕ, НАЗОВИТЕ ГОВОРЯЩЕМУ С ВАМИ ЯЗЫК, НА КОТОРОМ ВЫ ГОВОРИТЕ, И ЖДИТЕ ПОКА ВАС СОЕДИНЯТ С ПЕРЕВОДЧИКОМ.

FIG. 11.2. Healthy Mothers introduction translation.

Somali	<p>HADII AY DHIWATO KA'HAYSATO DAAWOYINKA IYO QALABKA DARYEELKA          CAAFIMAADKA AMA AAD U BAAHANTAHAY CAAFIMAADKA JOOGTADA ALI IYO          WIXII LA MID AH WAXAAD U YEERTAA TELEFOONKA 1-800-322-2588 MARKA          CIDDII KULA HADASHO U SHEEG LUUQAADDADA KUNA SII JIR LAYNKA          TELEFONKA SI LAGUUGU XIRO TURJUBAAN.</p>
Spanish	<p>SI TIENE USTED CUALQUIER PROBLEMA PARA ENTENDER ESTOS MATERIALES, O          SI NECESITA AYUDA PARA ENCONTRAR CUIDADO PARA LA SALUD, PUEDE          LLAMAR A HEALTHY MOTHERS, HEALTHY BABIES AL 1-800-322-2588. CUANDO          LLAME, DIGALE A LA PERSONA EL NOMBRE DE SU IDIOMA Y QUEDESE EN LA          LINEA HASTA QUE SEA CONECTADO CON UN INTERPRETE.</p>
Tigrigna	<p>ብይኒ ብዘሰሉ ዘለዎ ጽሑፋት ዘይተደላኩም ነገር ኣገተሉ ወይ ደግ ናይ ሕይዎና ኣገልግሎት          ተደልዮ ኣገድጺኦ ይደገቡም ኣብ ናይ ጥዕያት እደጋጉን ቆልዑትን (ሂልዚ ግዜርሳ ሂልዚ          ቢቢሳ) ዝገባል ሕይዎና ግዚክል ቁ 1-800-322-2588 ብድርጉል ይተሓተቱ ትህእሉ ኣኹም። ኣብ          ተደውሎሉ ገዜ ነቲ ተግርቦም ዕብ እየናይ ቋንቋ ተግረቡ ከምዘለኹም ምስ ነገርኩም ቋንቋኹም          ዝግረብ ዕብ (ትርጉም ኣገልግሎት) ከምዘለኩም ስለዝህክል ኣብ ግስግሥር ይደገቡም ሓልው።</p>
Ukrainian	<p>ЯКЩО ВИ ІСПИТУЄТЕ ТРУДНОШІ В РОЗУМІННІ МАТЕРІАЛУ, АБО ВАМ          НЕОБХІДНА ДОПОМОГА В ОТРИМАННІ МЕДИЧНОГО ЗАБЕЗПЕЧЕННЯ, ТО ВИ          МОЖЕТЕ ПОДЗВОНИТИ „ХЕЛСІ МАЗЕРС, ХЕЛСІ БЭЙБС“ (HEALTHY MOTHERS,          HEALTHY BABIES) ПО ТЕЛЕФОНУ 1-800-322-2588. КОЛИ ВИ ДЗОНИТЕ, НАЗОВІТЬ          РОЗМОВЛЯЮЩЕМУ З ВАМИ МОВУ, НА ЯКІЙ ВИ РОЗМОВЛЯЄТЕ, ТА ЧЕКАЙТЕ          ПОКИ ВАС СОЄДНЯТЬ З ПЕРЕКЛАДЧИКОМ.</p>
Vietnamese	<p>NEU BAN GAP KHÓ KHĂN TRONG VẤN ĐỀ THÔNG HIỂU CÁC TÀI LIỆU, HOẶC          NEU BAN CẦN GIÚP ĐỠ TRONG VIỆC TÌM DỊCH VỤ Y TẾ, BAN CÓ THỂ GỌI CHO          HỘI HEALTHY MOTHERS, HEALTHY BABIES TẠI SỐ ĐIỆN THOẠI 1-800-322-2588.          KHI BAN GỌI, BAN HÃY NÓI CHO NGƯỜI NGHE ĐIỆN THOẠI BIẾT BAN NÓI          NGÔN NGỮ GÌ, RỒI CẢM ĐIỆN THOẠI CHỜ ĐỢI, VÀ HỌ SẼ KIẾM NGƯỜI          THÔNG DỊCH ĐỂ NÓI ĐIỆN THOẠI VỚI BAN.</p>

FIG. 11.2. (Continued)

Generally, instructions to the interviewer appear in all capital letters or in brackets to set off the information from the parts that are read aloud. Words that require special emphasis can be italicized or put in boldface. Information read by an interviewer needs to sound conversational in tone rather than formal.

*Sample interviewer instruction:*

As I read the following list of information sources, please tell me whether the source is [READ SLOWLY] very important, important, unimportant, or very unimportant to you: [REPEAT CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY.]

## Cultural/Language Sensitivity

Knowing the target public well can aid design and secure a better response. For example, question wording may need to change depending on the age of the participants. Translators may be needed if a phone survey aims to interview people who do not speak English. Mail surveys, too, can benefit from making translations available. As shown in Figure 11.2, Washington state made a big effort to reach recent immigrants with its surveys and information intended to help ensure good health care for babies and toddlers.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Clearly, a myriad of design issues contribute to the effectiveness of a questionnaire. Research managers need to write questions in a way that will provide the most meaningful and unbiased information. The order of questions must seem logical and interesting to the respondent, and the directions to respondents and interviewers must prevent confusion. Pretesting needs to check for the existence of subtle bias in word choice.

No perfect survey exists, but various strategies can boost response rates and increase the validity of responses. The details can make the simple task of asking questions seem overwhelmingly complicated, but the use of pre-existing instruments or batteries of questions can provide useful models to follow. For the manager working within a tight budget, the principles laid out make it possible to run a reliable, valid, and useful survey. In addition, various books and even online software such as Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) and Zoomerang ([info.zoomerang.com](http://info.zoomerang.com)) can guide managers through the process. Meanwhile, for managers able to hire experts to do the job, the principles presented here can make it easier to monitor a survey research firm to ensure top-quality results.

# 12

## Collecting, Analyzing, and Reporting Quantitative Data

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### Chapter Contents

- Designing Surveys for Easy Data Entry
  - Training Interviewers
  - Call Sheets
  - Timing of Telephone Surveys
  - Response Rates
  - Reporting Univariate Relationships
  - Reporting Relationships Among Variables
  - Final Thoughts
- 

The best survey is easy to answer, easy to analyze, easy to report, and meaningful. Although most of the work goes into the writing of questions themselves, research managers also need to think ahead to analysis and reporting strategies. Designing surveys and training interviewers with data entry in mind can improve the speed and reliability of results. Planning what results need to be reported can aid analysis and ensure that data are collected in a way that makes it possible to create necessary tables and figures. Once the results become available, the manager can think about how to share good, bad, or surprising news with the client.

### DESIGNING SURVEYS FOR EASY DATA ENTRY

Several formats can be used to create easily analyzed questionnaires. Many survey research centers, for example, use CATI (computer-assisted

telephone interviewing) systems, in which telephone or personal interviewers enter data directly into the computer as they talk with respondents. Managers also can use do-it-yourself systems, some of which now are available online from sites such as Zoomerang ([info.zoomerang.com](http://info.zoomerang.com)) and Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)), which provide question templates for survey designers that range in sophistication (and cost) and can be customized. Statistical packages such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences provide more sophistication, supplying software for questionnaire design, data entry, and powerful analyses. The cost for these packages ranges from several hundred dollars to tens of thousands of dollars.

CATI or computer-assisted data collection (CADAC) can eliminate the need for cumbersome data-entry procedures. Interviewers using a CATI system typically wear a headset and ask questions prompted by the computer. As they type in the answers from each participant, the computer automatically updates the database to incorporate the new information. This type of system also is growing more popular for personal interviews, particularly for sensitive issues. Survey computer-aided data entry can reduce data entry errors by 77%. In addition, it can reduce confusion on complicated questionnaires that include conditional, or branching, questions. *Conditional questions* separate participants into groups depending on their response. For example, consumers who answer “yes” to a question about having previously purchased a company’s product can go on to answer questions about the product’s quality and the company’s responsiveness. Consumers who answer “no” answer a different set of questions that may focus on the potential interest in the company’s or the competitors’ products. CADAC or CATI systems now are common among professional research firms. Even when researchers do not have access to fully automated data collection systems, they often can make use of scannable response sheets on which respondents mark answers by filling in the appropriate circles.

If survey questionnaires must be entered manually, several design issues can make data entry more efficient. Even if researchers have access to automated data entry, these principles can make it easier to analyze and interpret the results.

## Directionality

As mentioned in chapter 11, attention to directionality can make results more intuitive to report. *Directionality* refers to the match between the numbers that represent answers to questions in the computer and the idea they symbolize. For example, on a Likert scale, a 5 is used to represent “strongly agree” and a 1 is used to represent “strongly disagree” so that a high score means more agreement instead of less agreement. Always

use a high number to indicate a positive response, even if the question is negatively worded. For example, a higher number should represent “very often” on a scale measuring “how often have you had difficulty receiving your order on time?”

### Coding and Code Books

Some questionnaire designers include the numbers for data entry purposes on the questionnaires themselves, whereas others rely on a separate code book. The *code book* is a copy of the questionnaire with annotations that direct data entry personnel and analysts. The annotations include short variable names—abbreviations for the questions—along with information on where in a computer data set the answers appear and what numbers represent each answer. We address each of these issues separately.

The advantage to including numbers on the questionnaire is that data entry personnel see a constant reminder of the codes they must enter, making memory lapses less likely. This can help considerably on complicated questionnaires. Numbers also can help respondents follow along when answers include a lot of response options. In the example below, note how much easier it is to find the center of the scale when it includes numbers instead of blanks:

Which of the following best describes our customer service representatives?

Incompetent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Competent
Impolite	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Polite
Unhelpful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Helpful

Which of the following best describes our customer service representatives?

Incompetent	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Competent
Impolite	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Polite
Unhelpful	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Helpful

Questionnaire designers must be careful, however, to ensure the questionnaire does not become so cluttered with numbers that it becomes difficult to read or seemingly impersonal. Usually, some codes appear only in the code book. Telephone questionnaires can include more codes, as long as the instrument remains easy for interviewers to read. It helps both interviewers and data entry personnel to have sets of answers clustered in small groups, such as in the following example:

OK, thinking again about some election issues, please think now about the public schools where you live, and tell me how good a job your schools are

doing educating students in each of the following areas. Use a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning *very poor* (VP) and 5 meaning *very good* (VG):

	VP				VG		
26. The first area is basic subjects such as reading, writing, and math	1	2	3	4	5		DK/RF
27. Training students for a specific job?	1	2	3	4	5		DK/RF
28. Preparing students for college?	1	2	3	4	5		DK/RF
29. Teaching moral values?	1	2	3	4	5		DK/RF

Note that the example includes abbreviations for the interviewers (such as DK/RF for “don’t know or refused to answer”) that respondents will not need to hear or see.

### Edge Coding

Usually, variable names and locator information for the data set in the computer appear only in the code book and in the margins. The use of margins for coding information is known as *edge coding*. These codes include the following:

1. *Tracking information.* Often, survey supervisors want to keep a record of which interviewer completed each questionnaire, on which day the survey took place if data collection occurs over several days or weeks, and any other information of background importance. Each set of answers is given an identification number, which makes it easier to check for and correct mistakes in data entry. This information usually appears in the top margin of a questionnaire, as shown below:

Caller: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone No.: \_\_\_\_\_ ID #: \_\_\_\_\_

College: \_\_\_\_\_ Year: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Gift to: \_\_\_\_\_

### Phase III Questions for University Foundation Fall 2005

First, I am going to read a short list of ways you might hear about Superior University. For each one, please tell me if you have heard about SU through this source *often, sometimes, rarely, or never* during the past year.

2. *Question information.* Most information regarding where answers to each question will appear in the computer go in the left margin next to the questions, as shown below:

We’re already halfway through our survey, and we really appreciate your help. Now, if you have declined to give money to SU at any time in the past, please tell me if each of the following issues have been *very important*,

*somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important* reasons for your decision.

		—(8)—		(N/A, Have never refused to give)				
		4	3	2	1	8	9	
(32) GETTO	27. You just didn't get around to it	VI	SI	NVI	NAI	N/A	RF/DK	
(33) AFFORD	28. You felt you couldn't afford it	VI	SI	NVI	NAI	N/A	RF/DK	
(34) DISSAT	29. You are dissatisfied with the quality of education at SU	VI	SI	NVI	NAI	N/A	RF/DK	
(35) NODIFF	30. You feel your gift would not make a difference to students at SU	VI	SI	NVI	NAI	N/A	RF/DK	

Note that the abbreviations for each question appear in all capital letters and require no more than eight letters. Many computer programs cannot accommodate variable names longer than eight letters. The information in parentheses refers to the location of the question responses in the data set. Most often this number points to the cell in a spreadsheet.

3. *Answer codes.* The numbers at the top of each column refer to the codes used by the computer to indicate the answers to the questions regarding barriers to giving. A 2 indicates "not very important," a 4 indicates "very important," and so on.

It is important to be able to find a particular questionnaire quickly in case of data entry mistakes. The identification number makes it possible to isolate the questionnaire that needs to be reentered. Without an identification number on each questionnaire (usually in the top right-hand corner, where the example says "ID #"), corrections can become an enormous headache. Keep in mind that some corrections always will be needed, thus the process of fixing mistakes in the data set has a name: *data cleaning*.

## Data Entry Conventions

You can assign any number to any answer, but many people are accustomed to seeing things a certain way. For example, it is common to assign a 1 to a "yes" answer and a 0 to a "no" answer. In a series of items for which respondents "check all that apply," each checked response would get a 1, and each blank response would get a 0.

Most questions do not need more than seven or eight response categories. As a result, another conventional number code is 8, which indicates "don't know." For refusals, some people use a 9, and others use a blank.

Remember that the code book must account for each answer. Some questions will have multiple answers (“check all that apply”), each of which will need to be coded as a separate item, as shown below:

50. What is your race or ethnicity? (MARK ALL THAT APPLY)

- |                           |                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| _____ 1. African American | 4. Native American _____ |
| _____ 2. Asian            | 5. White _____           |
| _____ 3. Hispanic         | 6. Other _____           |

[CODE AS 1/0]

9. RF

### Open-Ended Questions

Most computer programs do not lend themselves to *qualitative analysis*, meaning the analysis of words or pictures instead of numbers, so that data entry of open-ended data usually requires a special program. Open-ended questions usually are skipped during data entry of closed-ended questions. A separate word processing file can be used to keep track of identification numbers and open-ended comments for each question. A file or notebook also must be kept for interviewers and data-entry personnel to log problems or anomalies that will require decisions from the research manager, such as what to do with a respondent who has checked the space between two responses instead of checking one response clearly.

## TRAINING INTERVIEWERS

Interviewers must act polite even if respondents do not, read slowly and clearly, avoid lengthy conversations, and read each question in a consistent way. Interviewer training is an essential part of reliable data collection. Interviewer instructions vary slightly depending on the organization, the project, and the facilities, but some general guidelines apply to most situations. In their classic survey research text, Warwick and Lininger (1975) suggested several keys to standardized personal interviewing, which apply equally well to telephone interviews.

1. *Use the questionnaire carefully, but informally.* The questionnaire is a tool for data collection. Interviewers must be familiar with the purposes of the study and the questionnaire, including question order, question wording, skip patterns, and the like. Interviewers who are well prepared can take a relaxed, informal approach to their work. This helps maximize interviewers' ability to collect high-quality data and avoid carelessness in the interview process.

2. *Know the specific purpose of each question.* Interviewers need to understand what constitutes an adequate response to each question to satisfy

the purposes of the research project and to improve their use of the questionnaire. This information must be discussed as a part of interviewer training and reviewed before data collection begins.

3. *Ask the questions exactly as they are written.* Even small changes in question wording can alter the meaning of a question and a participant's response. Researchers must assume each participant has answered the exact same question. The consistent, unbiased wording of each question provides a strong foundation for the accuracy and reliability of study results. Neutral comments such as, "There are no right or wrong answers; we just want to know your opinion," should be used sparingly and only when interviewer feedback is required.

4. *Follow the order indicated in the questionnaire.* The order of questions in a survey instrument has been purposefully determined and carefully pretested. Arbitrary changes made in question order reduce the comparability of interviews and potentially introduce bias into questions that are sensitive to question order.

5. *Ask every question.* Interviewers need to ask every question, even when participants have answered a previous question or make comments that seem to answer a later question. Respondents' answers to questions often change as a result of small changes in question wording. In addition, the intent of questions that seem similar often are different. Researchers develop and pretest question wording carefully and with a specific purpose in mind. Unless respondents terminate an interview early, each question must be asked of each respondent.

6. *Do not suggest answers.* Interviewers must never assume to know a respondents' answer to a question, even after a respondent has answered seemingly similar questions in a consistent manner. All answers must be provided by the respondent.

7. *Provide transitions when needed.* A well-written questionnaire needs to contain transitional phrases that help the respondent understand changes in topics, question types, or question response categories. Interviewers use these transitional phrases to help guide a respondent through a questionnaire.

8. *Do not leave any question blank.* Interviewers need to make every effort to have participants answer every question, except those intentionally left blank because of skip patterns. Although researchers may choose to use a questionnaire even if questions are left blank, omitted questions reduce the reliability and external validity of survey results. It is best if each respondent answers every applicable question.

## CALL SHEETS

Telephone surveys typically use call sheets that have lists of numbers and places to record the outcome of each call attempt (Fig. 12.1). Sometimes call sheets include special information such as giving history for donors or an



individual's code number if an organization is calling a different individual—such as a spouse or a parent—to obtain more complete information from a household. The basic information appearing on most call sheets includes the following:

- CM = Completed interview
- RF = Refused
- NA = No answer (sometimes AM appears separately to indicate answering machine)
- BUS = Business/beeper/fax/modem
- BZ = Busy signal
- TM = Terminated
- DIS = Disconnected/out of service
- LB = Language barrier
- NE = No eligible respondents at this number
- CB = Call back appointment (interviewers fill in the details)
- OTH = Other (interviewers fill in the details)

### TIMING OF TELEPHONE SURVEYS

The optimum times of day and days of the week for doing telephone surveys vary depending on geographic region and time of the year. Although calling on Sunday evenings usually works well, a manager will not want to plan a survey for Super Bowl Sunday, for example. Generally, however, weeknights between 6:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. are considered reasonable hours for calling.

### RESPONSE RATES

Research reports must include information regarding how many people approached for the survey actually completed it. Because probability sampling and inferential statistics assume 100% of eligible respondents will participate, people evaluate the validity of conclusions based partly on the response rate obtained. Because so many survey methods exist, the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) has released a white paper discussing a myriad of specialized issues and methods for reporting outcome rates for surveys using mail surveys, random-digit dialing (RDD), in-person interviews, and other methods (AAPOR, 2004). Most practitioners generally will find the following several pieces of information sufficient to report outcomes in a way that complies with AAPOR's ethical guidelines:

1. *The total sample size.* This is the total number of people (or phone numbers or addresses) used in the study. For example, for an RDD survey, a manager might draw a sample of 2,500 random phone numbers to achieve

a final  $n$  of 800. Chapter 6 addresses how to draw the right size of total sample to achieve the desired valid sample.

2. *The valid sample size.* This is the number of sample elements (e.g., individuals, households, companies) in the total sample that remain after removing invalid phone numbers or addresses. These include nonworking phone numbers, respondents who do not fit the profile necessary to be included in the sample (e. g., not registered to vote), and respondents who do not speak English when surveyors do not speak other languages. In addition, research managers typically remove phone numbers and addresses from a sample if interviewers have made three to five attempts to reach someone at that location. The eliminated numbers are considered unreachable. Some market research firms only make one or two attempts, called *call-backs* in phone-survey lingo, but this practice is questionable scientifically. If an insufficient number of attempts have been made before the completion of the study, the location is considered a noncontact location and must remain in the valid sample. It is in the research manager's interest to minimize the number of noncontacts because they lower the response rate and can raise questions about the study's quality:

$$\text{Valid Sample Size} = \text{Total Sample Size} - \text{Ineligibles} - \text{Unreachables}$$

3. *The completion rate.* This is the number of people who complete a survey out of the *total* sample size. If the researcher can anticipate the completion rate, sometimes called the *minimum response rate* (AAPOR, 2004), this will determine how big a sample must be drawn to achieve the desired number of completed surveys. For example, if the completion rate is 31% and a sample of 384 is needed, the manager determines, by dividing 384 by .31, that 1249 numbers will be required to end up with 384 completed surveys:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Total Sample Size} &= \frac{\text{Target } n \text{ of Completed Surveys}}{\text{Completion Rate in Decimal Form}} \\ \text{TSS} &= \frac{384}{.31} = 1,249 \end{aligned}$$

4. *The response rate.* This is the number of people who completed a survey out of the *valid* sample size. This number, also called a *cooperation* rate by AAPOR (2004), is the number most people want to see. Because the valid sample size is smaller than the total sample size, this number shows that a survey's quality is better than the completion rate makes it seem. Research managers strive to keep this number as high as possible. Unfortunately, phone surveys these days often have response rates as low as 45% to 55%, although some achieve rates as high as 80%. Mail surveys with a single

mailing (no reminders) usually garner only about a 30% response rate:

$$\text{Response Rate} = \frac{\text{Completed Questionnaires}}{\text{Valid Sample Size}}$$

5. *The refusal rate.* This is the number of people who declined to answer the survey out of the valid sample size. Research managers strive to keep this number low:

$$\text{Refusal Rate} = \frac{\text{Refusals}}{\text{Valid Sample Size}}$$

6. *The noncontact rate.* This is the number of people who could not be reached out of the total sample and, therefore, never had the opportunity to complete the survey or refuse to do so. They cannot be eliminated from the valid sample:

$$\text{Noncontact Rate} = \frac{\text{Noncontacts}}{\text{Total Sample Size}}$$

## REPORTING UNIVARIATE RELATIONSHIPS

The minimum information usually required for a research report includes frequencies, percentages, means, and, for some clients, standard deviations. The frequencies tell the client how many people answered each question using each response. Frequency tables usually include percentages as well, so the reader can make informed comparisons across questions.

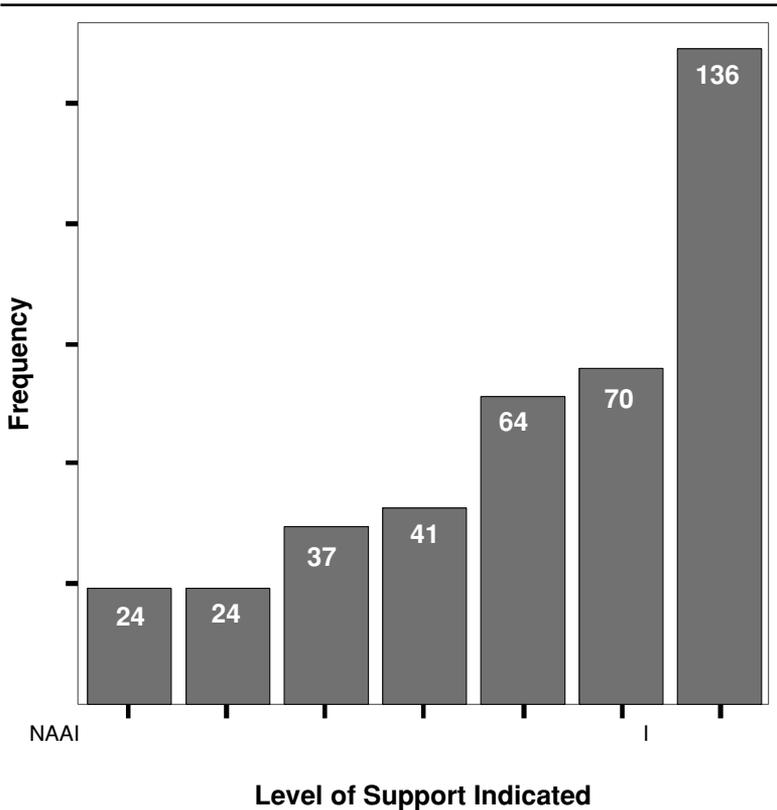
As shown in Table 12.1, a frequency table includes both the number of people who answered the question and the number who did not (called *missing*). The valid percentage is based on the number of people who answered the question (338), whereas the unadjusted percentage refers to the total sample size (400). In this example, the numbers used on the survey appear along with the descriptions of the responses, but most research reports include only the descriptions.

Researchers also can present frequencies visually, using tables, bar charts, histograms, or pie charts. Table 12.2 displays a bar chart, which often can give clients a better grasp of the range and strength of responses than they might get from just a recitation of mean and standard deviation. Pie charts, meanwhile, can communicate the contrasts and similarities between the usefulness of information sources, as shown in Figure 12.2. This particular example illustrates that registered voters tended to consider both daily news reports and interpersonal contacts as important sources of election information in 2004, but they were less likely to discount interpersonal sources than mediated ones.

**TABLE 12.1**  
Sample Frequency Table: Purpose of Most Recent Visit to Convention Center

<i>Valid</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>
1.00 Attend a sporting event	121	30.3	35.8
2.00 Attend a musical or theater performance	54	13.5	16.0
3.00 Attend a fair or exhibit	51	12.8	15.1
4.00 Attend a rally or workshop	30	7.5	8.9
5.00 Attend a graduation ceremony	17	4.3	5.0
6.00 Attend a private social function	13	3.3	3.8
7.00 Get information	10	2.5	3.0
8.00 Other	42	10.5	12.4
<b>Valid Total</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>84.5</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Missing</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>15.5</b>	
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

**TABLE 12.2**  
Support for Tobacco Use Prevention Among Washington State Registered Voters in the 2004 Presidential Election



Note: Data excerpted from a random telephone survey of registered Washington State voters ( $N = 397$ ) conducted October 24–28, 2004 (Pinkleton & Austin, 2005). Responses range from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important), with 4 representing the midpoint of the scale.

## REPORTING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG VARIABLES

Often, a client wants to compare results for several groups, such as education levels, gender, ethnicity, or membership. The crosstab table usually provides the most intuitive presentation format. Crosstab tables usually present frequencies and column or row percentages. The layout of the table will encourage readers to interpret the data in a particular way. Note that in the first example, shown in Table 12.3, the table is arranged so that the row percentages display how many participants of each political orientation support tobacco use prevention efforts. In the second example, the row percentages display how many of the low, medium, and high supporters come from each political orientation. The first table shows more dispersed support among conservatives but strong support among moderates and liberals. This information can help communication managers understand which target groups need persuasion and which need reinforcement. The second table, shown in Table 12.4, shows that high supporters tend to cross the political spectrum fairly equally but that low support is disproportionately conservative. This information suggests that tobacco prevention represents an issue on which people from varied political orientations tend to agree. This could make tobacco use prevention a useful issue to emphasize when trying to unify the electorate.

**TABLE 12.3**  
Political Orientation and Level of Support for Tobacco Prevention in the 2004  
Presidential Election Among Washington State Registered Voters:  
Row Percentage Example

<i>Political Orientation</i>	<i>Tobacco Use Prevention</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Low Support</i>	<i>Medium Support</i>	<i>High Support</i>	
<b>Conservative</b>				
Count	44	15	78	137
Row Percentage	32.1%	10.9%	56.9%	100.0%
<b>Moderate</b>				
Count	27	10	102	139
Row Percentage	19.4%	7.2%	73.4%	100.0%
<b>Liberal</b>				
Count	12	16	79	107
Row Percentage	11.2%	15.0%	73.8%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>				
Count	83	41	259	383
Row Percentage	21.7%	10.7%	67.6%	100.0%

Data from a random telephone survey of registered Washington State voters ( $N = 397$ ) conducted during October 24–28, 2004 (Pinkleton & Austin, 2005).

**TABLE 12.4**  
**Political Orientation and the Level of Support for Tobacco Prevention:**  
**Column Percentage Example**

<i>Political Orientation</i>	<i>Tobacco Use Prevention</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Low Support</i>	<i>Medium Support</i>	<i>High Support</i>	
<b>Conservative</b>				
Count	44	15	78	137
Column Percentage	53.0%	36.6%	30.1%	35.8%
<b>Moderate</b>				
Count	27	10	102	139
Column Percentage	32.5%	24.4%	39.4%	36.3%
<b>Liberal</b>				
Count	12	16	79	107
Column Percentage	14.5%	39.0%	30.5%	27.9%
<b>Total</b>				
Count	83	41	259	383
Column Percentage	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data from a random telephone survey of registered Washington State voters ( $N = 397$ ) conducted during October 24–28, 2004 (Pinkleton & Austin, 2005).

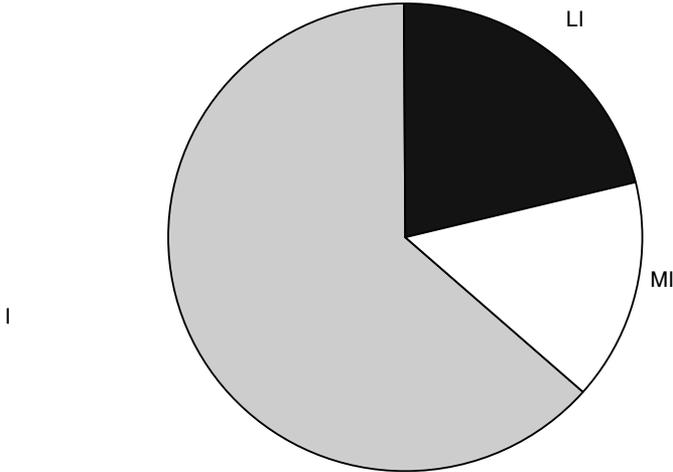
The research manager needs to determine which presentation provides the most helpful information to the program planner. Although it is possible to include both types of information in the same table, by displaying both row and column percentages and even total percentages, too much information can create confusion. Evaluate the communication program needs carefully before creating the tables.

Crosstab tables only lend themselves to breakdowns across a limited number of categories, such as low/medium/high or male/female. For a variable such as age, which in a standard public opinion survey can range from 18 to 94 or more, managers need to condense it into decades or market-oriented categories (such as 18–34) to make the crosstab table interpretable. Strive to make tables readable at a glance.

Statistics such as the *Chi-square* can be used to highlight especially notable differences across groups. Many clients, however, do not want to see the statistics themselves and may find too much statistical information intimidating. Keep the presentation interpretable while ensuring statistical rigor behind the scenes. Meanwhile, always be prepared for the client who appreciates statistical depth.

Another way to present relationships is through a correlation coefficient. Correlations are useful for examining the strength and direction of relationships between two interval-level (e.g., “very interested” to “not at all interested”) or ratio-level (e.g., “0 times to 7 times”) variables. Correlations are less intuitive for a client without a statistical background, however. It can be useful, therefore, to run correlations as background while presenting

**The Importance of Conversation With Family and Friends for the Washington State Registered Voters in the 2004 Presidential Election**



**The Importance of Daily News for the Washington State Registered Voters in the 2004 Presidential Election**

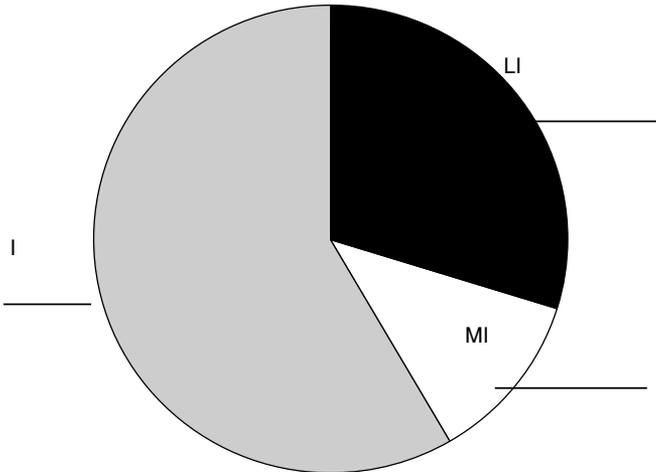


FIG. 12.2. Pie charts displaying registered voters' use of interpersonal and mass media information sources in the 2004 election. Data excerpted from a random telephone survey of registered Washington State voters ( $N = 397$ ) conducted October 24–28, 2004 (Pinkleton & Austin, 2005).

condensed versions of the scales in a crosstab table. Condensing the data may mask subtle relationships; check the tables to make sure that they do not seem to tell a different story from the original statistics.

A correlation coefficient ranges between  $-1$  and  $+1$ . A  $-1$  indicates that the two variables are exact opposites. For example, if younger children always like an event featuring Cookie Monster more, people always dislike Cookie Monster more as they get older. A  $+1$  indicates the two variables are perfect matches, for example, if the price people will pay for a product increases exactly in proportion to how valuable they think the product is.

Of course, such perfect relationships do not exist. The statistician, therefore, looks to see whether the coefficient is “significantly” different from 0, which would indicate that two variables change with no relevance to each other. The closer the coefficient is to  $+1$  or  $-1$ , the stronger the relationship is between the two variables. In the information-seeking example, examining the relationship between age and interest level, the correlation between the two original variables is about  $-.17$ , indicating a small and negative association between age and interest: Older people, in other words, have slightly less interest than younger people have, but the difference is not dramatic.

Research managers may encounter times when they need to consider complex relationships using sophisticated multivariate statistics. For the most part, this sort of analysis still needs to be translated into results interpretable by a statistical novice or math phobe. Keep in mind that even the most sophisticated analysis is useful only if it is understandable, and the most prescient research is helpful only if it gets used. Keep the presentation as simple and compelling as possible.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In the blur of program-planning deadlines, the communication manager can be tempted to plunge into a research project without thinking through the details of data entry or later presentation. The more communication managers think ahead, however, the more useful the final report is likely to be. The research plan can serve as an invaluable tool for determining what a research report should look like. Managers often map out the final report before doing the research, demonstrating—without the numbers, of course—what the answers to the questions raised in a situation analysis should look like. Planning to this level of detail can help ensure that the questions asked on a survey are designed to make it possible to create the tables desired. In addition, planning ahead for data entry and analysis helps focus the research manager’s work and can save both time and money. Just as effective communication program plans focus on the final outcomes—the goals and objectives—from the start, the most effective research projects envision the final report well before the first survey responses are collected.

### SIDEBAR 12.1 American Association for Public Opinion Research

#### III. Standards for Minimal Disclosure

Good professional practice imposes the obligation upon all public opinion researchers to include, in any report of research results, or to make available when that report is released, certain essential information about how the research was conducted. At a minimum, the following items should be disclosed:

1. Who sponsored the survey, and who conducted it.
2. The exact wording of questions asked, including the text of any preceding instruction or explanation to the interviewer or respondents that might reasonably be expected to affect the response.
3. A definition of the population under study, and a description of the sampling frame used to identify this population.
4. A description of the sample selection procedure, giving a clear indication of the method by which the respondents were selected by the researcher, or whether the respondents were entirely self-selected.
5. Sample sizes and, where appropriate, eligibility criteria, screening procedures, and response rates computed according to AAPOR Standard Definitions. At a minimum, a summary of disposition of sample cases should be provided so that response rates could be computed.
6. A discussion of the precision of the findings, including estimates of sampling error and a description of any weighting or estimating procedures used.
7. Which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than on the total sample, and the size of such parts.
8. Method, location, and dates of data collection.

From time to time, AAPOR Council may issue guidelines and recommendations on best practices with regard to the release, design and conduct of surveys.

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**USING THEORY FOR PRACTICAL  
GUIDANCE**

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# 13

## What Theory Is and Why It Is Useful

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### Chapter Contents

- What Is a Theory?
  - Finding a Good Theory
  - A Theoretical Framework for “Symmetrical” Public Relations
  - A Theoretical Framework for “Asymmetrical” Campaigns
  - Final Thoughts
- 

Despite the admonition of a famous social scientist named Kurt Lewin that “nothing is as practical as a good theory” (Marrow, 1969), practitioners and students of public relations often seem skeptical. After all, the term *theory* sounds academic, not applied, and theories usually emanate from academics in ivory tower institutions, seemingly insulated from real-world complications. But Lewin was right: A good understanding of a few “good theories” enhances the strategic manager’s success. Theories—essentially generalizations about how people think and behave—help determine appropriate goals and objectives for a communication program. Scientifically tested theories also help communication programmers develop effective strategies to achieve those goals and objectives.

Because applying theory makes communication planning more scientific and less haphazard, it helps ensure effectiveness. The value of being scientific does not diminish the need for creativity, but science makes it possible to (a) *predict* what will happen, such as anticipating the results from a mailing versus a radio ad campaign; (b) *understand* why something has happened, such as why attendance was poor at a special event; and (c) *control* what will happen (to the extent that this is possible). To achieve success, the manager wants as much control as feasible, and applied

theory provides the most control possible in a field notorious for its uncertainty.

### WHAT IS A THEORY?

Theories explain why people behave in certain ways and how people are likely to respond to something. This gives the strategic manager the ability to make predictions based on an understanding of communication processes and effects. This is especially important to communication managers because much public relations communication takes place through gatekeepers such as reporters and opinion leaders instead of through paid advertising, increasing the opportunities for plans to go awry. In addition, many communication results seem difficult to quantify. These difficulties force managers to choose. Either accept the inability to control process and outcome along with its consequence, a lack of credibility, or find a way to exert more control, which requires developing the best understanding of likely explanations and predictions of communication processes and effects.

In truth, we all operate on the basis of theories every day. Many predictions come from personal experience. Savvy practitioners know that pitching a story to a reporter on deadline breeds failure. Localizing a story makes it more attractive. Media relations experience teaches practitioners what sorts of things to say (and not say) when pitching a story to an editor and what types of publications will find a story about a pastry chef interesting. All of these predictions illustrate theories. For example, the need to avoid the reporter's deadline pressure illustrates the larger point, or theory, that "timing affects receptivity." The need to localize a story exemplifies the theory that "relevance affects acceptance." Finally, the appropriateness of specialized publications, such as culinary magazines, to the pastry chef story demonstrates the theory that "proximity increases relevance." To the extent that the manager can control the variables of timing, relevance, and proximity, the better the manager can control the result of media relations activities. To the extent that the manager learns from others' experiences instead of from personal trial and error, the manager will endure fewer opportunities to learn from mistakes.

### FINDING A GOOD THEORY

Theories cannot offer guarantees; instead, they improve the probability of success. Because of the way the scientific method works, theories are never proven beyond any doubt. They gain support, and they can be disproved. A scientific test of a theory sets up a situation in which the theory has to either succeed or fail. To gain support (never "proof"), a theory must demonstrate success at least 95% of the time in a given statistical test. The more times a theory is tested and the more methods and contexts used

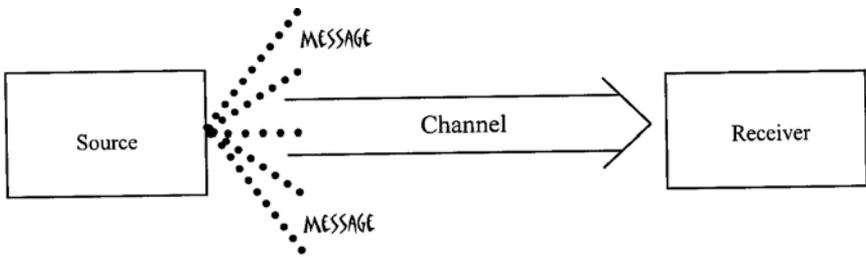


FIG. 13.1. The linear model of communication. The linear model is popular and easy to understand but does not accurately reflect the way communication really works.

to test it, the more confidence a practitioner can place in the theory's predictions. As a result of testing, theories often evolve; for example, testing may show that a theory applies better in some contexts than in others. This makes it important to keep up to date on what is new in communication, organization, and persuasion theory to know the nuances that give theories the most relevance to situations encountered by professionals. This becomes particularly important when a theory creates controversy or fails too many tests.

One of the most popular theories used by practitioners, also the most criticized, is called the *linear model* of communication or the *bullet theory* of communication (Fig. 13.1). Although the model originally was developed to illustrate the constraints that messages encounter when sent electronically through wires, too many people have embraced the illustrative model as an explanatory device, a theory of how communication works. Much research has shown that the bullet theory is too simplistic. Nevertheless, publicity-based communication programs essentially operate on that outdated theory, assuming that just getting the message out will have desirable effects.

Gaining exposure via the media can serve a valuable purpose. But a reliance on publicity greatly limits the practitioner's ability to achieve and measure success for important persuasive goals such as behavior change or important relational goals such as trust and commitment. Just because a message receives a lot of exposure does not mean anyone will pay attention to it, understand it, believe it, or act differently because of it. As a result, clip counts can be meaningless to a program focused on attitude change, behavior change, or even knowledge change. Because activities that do not contribute demonstrably to goal achievement waste time and resources, programs must include publicity only to the extent that reasons exist to predict and explain how publicity will help achieve stated goals. These reasons are theories.

Theories often use fancy social science terms that have special meaning to scholars looking for nuances, but good theories usually can be boiled down into sensible language that is fairly simple to apply. Some theories

especially relevant to public relations practitioners focus on how relationships work, and others focus on persuasion. Theories focused on relationships correspond to what Grunig and Hunt (1984) called the *symmetrical model* of public relations, and theories focused on persuasion correspond to Grunig's (1989) *asymmetrical model* of public relations. According to Grunig, strategic managers often operate on the basis on both models, instead of on one exclusively. Two remaining models of public relations management—the publicity model and the public information model—operate on the basis of the outdated bullet theory, focusing solely on distributing messages. These two models cannot be considered strategic management.

### A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR “SYMMETRICAL” PUBLIC RELATIONS

Several useful theories explain how the symmetrical model of public relations works, as well as what makes it work so well. These theories explain why public relations is relevant and useful for an organization. They also guide problem identification and goal setting because they help the manager understand when and why issues should be considered problems or achievements. Four theories are especially important for the public relations manager, whose ultimate focus rests on long-term relationship building.

#### **Systems Theory—Adaptation and Adjustment**

According to systems theory, organizations are most effective when they acknowledge that they interact with, affect, and are affected by their environment. They need to bring in resources that enhance their success and deflect threats that can compromise their survival. Organizations in *open systems*, which means in real life, exchange information, energy, and material with their environments. Organizations operating in *closed systems* exist in a vacuum without interacting with or exchanging things with any other organization or person. In an open system, the organization sometimes implements changes (e.g., flextime hours) to adjust to changes in the environment (e.g., increasingly difficult commute traffic). The organization also tries to obtain accommodations from the environment (e.g., having the county pay for access road maintenance) that help it operate effectively. According to the open systems model (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Cutlip et al., 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984), organizations that close themselves off from this exchange process become inert or disintegrate. In other words, they become irrelevant or ineffective.

Activities necessary to succeed, according to systems theory, include surveillance, interpretation, and advising management (Table 13.1). *Surveillance*—also called *scanning*—means gathering information about the

**TABLE 13.1**  
Necessary Activities According to Systems Theory

<i>Surveillance</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Advising Management</i>
Gather information about environment	Prioritize issues	Suggest concrete actions
Gather information about opportunities and challenges	Prioritize publics	Suggest measurable objectives
	Anticipate changes	
	Develop recommendations	

environment and possible challenges or opportunities (data collection). Interpretation means having the ability to make sense of the information gathered to be able to prioritize issues and publics, anticipate how the situation may change in ways that may help or hurt the organization, and develop recommendations for action (theorize). Advising management means making credible suggestions for concrete actions that will achieve measurable objectives consistent with organizational goals. To sum up systems theory, organizations do not exist in a vacuum. They need to perform ongoing research to understand changing environmental constraints and possibilities.

### Co-Orientation Theory

This theory helps to delineate what makes communication productive. According to co-orientation theory (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972; Newcomb, 1953), people and organizations relate to one another successfully to the extent that they think similarly about ideas. The co-orientation model shows the ways two parties may relate to the same idea (Fig. 13.2). Each party will have impressions both about the idea and about what the other party thinks about the idea. On one hand, the two parties can agree and know that they agree, but they also can think they disagree. On the other hand, they may disagree but think they agree. Even more confusing, they may think they are discussing the same idea, such as improving customer service responsiveness, when in fact they are thinking about different ideas, such as a need for new procedures versus a need for additional training. According to co-orientation theory, the most effective communication takes place when both parties agree and when they know they agree, which means they have achieved consensus.

Grunig & Huang (2000) wrote that the application of co-orientation theory promotes long-term success, but its usefulness may not seem obvious when examining only short-term outcomes. Clients and CEOs may not understand how measures such as agreement, accuracy, and understanding

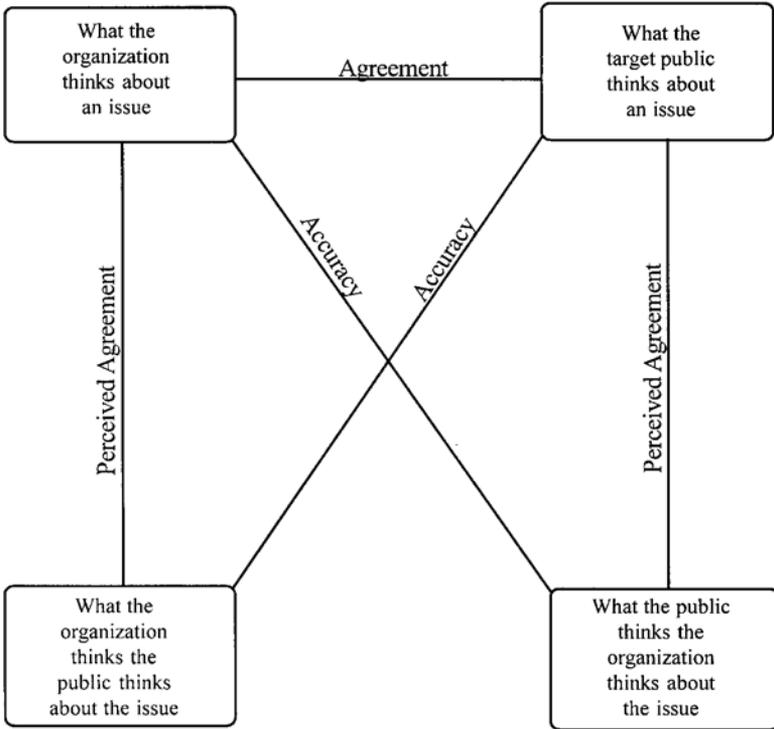


FIG. 13.2. The co-orientation model. The co-orientation model focuses the manager’s attention on relationships, consistent with the overall mission of public relations.

relate to the achievement of organizational goals such as increased sales, increased membership renewals, or passage of an important bill in Congress. As a result, managers trying to demonstrate long-term communication effectiveness need to focus on outcomes such as trust and control mutuality, relational commitment, and relational satisfaction (Table 13.2). *Trust* is defined as the belief that the other party will not exploit one’s goodwill. *Control mutuality* refers to the degree to which the parties believe that they have enough control over the relationship and the other party’s goals and activities. *Relational commitment* means the desire to maintain the relationship, including level of interest in maintaining membership, level of acceptance

**TABLE 13.2**  
Measurable Outcomes of a Mutually Beneficial Relationship

- 
- Trust
  - Control mutuality
  - Relational commitment
  - Relational satisfaction
-

of the organization's goals, willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization, and extent to which the party believes the benefits of maintaining the relationship outweigh the costs of discontinuing it. Finally, *relational satisfaction* is defined as the degree to which a relationship seems fulfilling. Stafford and Canary (1991) suggested that relational satisfaction may be the most important measure of an effective relationship, but measures such as trust and commitment seem especially well suited to the demonstration of communication's contributions to organizational goals. Discover Card has applied co-orientation theory to try to preserve its relationship with customers even as it pursues their overdue accounts. The company has begun to use greeting cards from Hallmark to notify some customers about their late payments. According to Scott Robinette, president of Hallmark Loyalty, "Discover didn't want to alienate those customers" (Associated Press, 2004). As a result, customers have received a card encouraging them to "give us a call so we can work through this together" instead of getting a threatening business letter.

According to co-orientation theory, organizations must try to maximize levels of agreement, understanding, and accuracy among the organization's communicators and stakeholders. These indicators of successful communication contribute to long-term success measured by outcomes such as trust and commitment. Co-orientation theory demonstrates the importance of taking a long-term view of the organization's relationship with its stakeholders despite the temptation to focus on short-term goals such as the success of the next product promotion.

### **Situational Theory of Strategic Constituencies**

This approach responds to the truism that "you cannot please all of the people all of the time." An organization must prioritize its efforts, and that includes the publics on which it focuses. Higher priority goes to publics whose opposition or support can either help or hinder the organization's ability to achieve its goals and mission. Publics can be internal to the organization (e.g., union employees), external to the organization (e.g., environmental groups), or both (e.g., employees who are members of environmental groups). According to Grunig and Repper (1992), strategic constituencies can be segmented into categories of active, potentially active (latent), and passive publics.

An *active public* is made up of individuals who perceive that what an organization does matters to them (called *level of involvement*), that the consequences of what an organization does affects them (called *problem recognition*), and that they have the ability to do something to affect the organization's actions or the consequences of those actions (called *constraint recognition*). Actions can be positive, such as purchasing stock or maintaining memberships, or negative, such as engaging in boycotts and lawsuits.

A latent public is one that has the potential to become active. These are people who should care about an issue because it could affect them but who may not be interested, may not know about the issue, or may not have the ability to take action.

Active publics can be divided into three types:

1. *The long haul.* Those interested in all aspects of the issue
2. *Special interests.* Those interested only in certain aspects of the topic
3. *Hot button.* Those who get interested only if an emotional debate ensues

A fourth category—apathetic publics—do not care about any aspect of the issue and have no relevance to the organization.

### **Excellence Theory**

According to excellence theory, building mutually beneficial relationships with strategic constituencies saves money by preventing problems such as lawsuits, boycotts, and strikes and by increasing employees' satisfaction, which enhances productivity and quality. According to Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995), excellence theory integrates systems theory and the situational theory of strategic constituencies explained in the previous section. It proposes that managed communication helps achieve organizational goals because it helps reconcile organizational goals with the expectations of its relevant publics (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992). Excellence theory proposes that public relations is most *effective* when the senior communication manager helps shape organizational goals and helps determine which external publics are most important strategically. Communication management will be most *successful* when it operates strategically by identifying (segmenting) active publics and developing symmetrical communication programs that have success that can be measured (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Grunig & Repper, 1992).

### **Summarizing the Symmetrical Perspective**

The combination of theories integrated into excellence theory takes a holistic view of communication and organizational success. According to this viewpoint, organizations must operate with an understanding of and respect for others who coexist in their social system. Because the system constantly evolves, the environment can change in ways that can affect the organization in beneficial or detrimental ways. Publics operating in the environment also evolve, which means their *relevance* to the organization—the degree to which their support makes a difference to organizational

**TABLE 13.3**  
Comparison of the Us–Us and Us–Them Operating Styles

	<i>Us–Us</i>	<i>Us–Them</i>
View of strategic publics	Publics are stakeholders or partners	Publics are adversaries
Character of communication	Integrate publics' values into organizational goals	Communication lacks shared understanding
Focus of goals	Win–win situations (consensus)	Self-preservation (consensus unlikely)
Communication style	Focus on responsiveness (accommodation and advocacy)	Indifference or counteraction (advocacy only)

success—also will change. Organizations' success depends on their ability to integrate the needs and desires of relevant publics into organizational goals and activities to gain and maintain their trust and commitment.

This view can be summarized as an “us and us” (us–us) philosophy. It also can be summarized as the practice of social responsibility. According to this philosophy, the mission of public relations is to develop and maintain “win–win” situations for the organization and the publics on whose goodwill its success depends. This can be contrasted with an “us and them” (us–them) philosophy, which often devolves into an “us versus them” situation (Table 13.3). The reason for this is that the us–them philosophy fails to integrate strategic publics' values into organizational goals. Instead, it views organizational values and goals as distinct from publics' values and goals. According to systems theory, the us–them approach is likely to fail because it discounts the organization's interdependence with its environment. According to co-orientation theory, the us–them approach is likely to fail because communication will lack shared understanding and will be less likely to achieve consensus. According to situational theory, the us–them approach does not recognize that active and latent publics can take action damaging to the organization's ability to succeed and will do so if they feel the need and find the opportunity. According to excellence theory, the us–them approach fails to appreciate that responsiveness is less expensive and more effective than indifference.

According to the us–us philosophy, symmetrical public relations benefits the organization because strategic communication programs are essential to existence in an interdependent social system. The communication manager's ability to understand strategic publics, communicate successfully with them, and advise management about the implications of evolving relationships can have long-term, measurable effects on the bottom line.



1. *Consumer loyalty.* Increasingly, studies have demonstrated that consumer loyalty has value to an organization that translates into measurable profits. For example, a study by the Walker Group ("In Focused," 1996) showed that consumers are 90% more likely to buy products or services from a socially responsible company. In addition, the *Harvard Business Review* ("Building Customer," 1996) reported that even small reductions in consumer defection rates had remarkable effects on profits. For example, reducing client defections by 5% increased profitability to an auto service chain by more than 20%, to insurances brokerages by more than 40%, to software by about 30%, and to credit cards by more than 80%. On the other hand, a 2002 survey found that 91% of Americans who dislike a company's citizenship practices would consider taking their purchasing elsewhere ("Numbers Don't," 2004).

2. *Employee morale.* Businesses have discovered that employee morale is not a nicety but an important factor affecting recruitment, retention, quality, and profitability. For example, fear of job loss can hurt morale, which can contribute to accidents, mistakes, and decreased productivity. Helping morale, on the other hand, can increase productivity and loyalty. For example, Johnson and Johnson's Balancing Work and Family Program ("A Look," 1997) demonstrated that 71% of employees who used the company's flexible time and leave policies cited the policy as a "very important" reason for staying with the company. Two years into the program, employees maintained that their jobs were interfering less with their family lives even while the number of hours worked on average had increased. The program has helped keep Johnson and Johnson on *Working Mother's* top-10 list of family-friendly companies for the past 19 years (*Working Mother*, 2005). Meanwhile, companies such as Xerox and IBM have found that potential employees like the idea of working for a company that promotes volunteerism among employees. The Families and Work Institute has found, however, that nearly 40% of companies do not actively communicate policies such as their work-family programs to employees. Companies such as Allstate, on the other hand, provide managers with training—in Allstate's case, 3 days' worth—on how to foster a supportive work environment. Good employee relations can help recruitment as well as retention, with a variety of magazines now ranking companies on issues such as family friendliness and work environment. According to the Cone 2002 survey ("Numbers Don't," 2004), 80% of respondents would refuse to work at a company that they consider socially irresponsible.

3. *Shareholder value.* Retaining efficient and creative employees increases profits because quality and productivity increases, and less money needs to be spent on recruitment and on problems related to quality control or employee grievances. Retaining loyal customers reduces the need for attracting new customers and can sharply increase profits. One study of 600 Morgan Stanley Capital International companies between 1999 and

2003 found that companies scoring well on environmental and social performance measures outperformed others financially by 23% (“Numbers Don’t,” 2004).

4. *Community goodwill.* Another apparent nicety that must be viewed as essential, community goodwill or support, can make or break a company in times of crisis. For example, when Los Angeles erupted in rioting following the Rodney King beating by police officers in 1991, McDonald’s found its restaurants standing unscathed in neighborhoods that had been essentially razed and looted. McDonald’s attributed its survival to the company’s long-standing involvement in activities intended to benefit the communities in which they operated and the employees who worked for the company in those communities. According to Steve Voien of Edelman’s corporate social responsibility practice, the agency’s fifth annual Trust Barometer survey of 1,200 opinion leaders concluded that companies cannot afford to ignore the concerns of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and instead should endeavor to associate with them due to their much higher credibility (Voien, 2004).

5. *Community well being.* Because employees, customers, and potential employees all live in the community, the health of the community affects the well being of the company. Many indirect effects, such as good schools, safe streets, thriving arts, and health promotion all benefit the company by improving the environment in which the organization exists. As Feldstein (1992) wrote, 90% of the \$144 billion given to charity in 1990 came from individuals, and only 5% came from businesses. He reported estimates that 87% of Americans give to charities and 78% volunteer their time. Many companies, as a result, have been divesting themselves of a major opportunity to help their communities and thereby help themselves. Both large- and small-scale projects make a difference. For example, companies such as Helene Curtis Industries, Inc., in Chicago and Columbia Sportswear in Portland “adopt” families and buy holiday gifts and household necessities for them. The consumer goods company Tom’s of Maine, meanwhile, runs a 5%-for-volunteering program, which allows employees to spend 5% of their work time helping nonprofit organizations. Starbucks encourages customers to join in their embrace of issues by providing their own grants and promoting purchases that benefit selected causes. Working Assets long-distance telephone service performs an annual survey of its customers to select the causes it will promote during the following year.

### Keys to Making the Symmetrical Ideal Sensible

Managers need not worry that acting socially responsible can lead to giving away the store, which would be asymmetrical and counterproductive. As Richmond (1990) wrote, stakeholders will understand that the organization must ensure its own success. Indeed, as McDonald’s learned so

dramatically, stakeholders who see their values incorporated into the organization's values and goals have a vested interest in helping ensure the organization's survival. The manager can operate on several principles drawn from Richmond's sensible approach to corporate responsibility, what he called "putting the public in public relations":

1. *Be honest.* There is no shame in being straightforward that your organization needs to profit from its relationship with its publics.

2. *Be creative.* There is no need to give away huge amounts of resources to promote mutually beneficial relationships. A hotel, for example, can offer special services such as a tour of an award-winning kitchen and a meal as a door prize for a nonprofit group holding a special event at the hotel. Or the hotel can provide the room free, provided the organization agrees to include a no-host bar.

3. *Do your research.* The manager must know the public to find common ground on which to build understanding that leads to mutually beneficial goals. Richmond (1990), for example, knew that a major southwest association was determining where to hold its next Seattle-based conference. Richmond learned that one of the two major charities supported by the organization also was supported by his client, the Seattle Sheraton. The charity was happy to encourage the organization to support the business of another benefactor, and the organization was pleased to give its business to an organization that shared its philanthropic priorities.

4. *Find the right fit.* Philanthropic efforts must be strategic, but this means they need to reflect genuine concerns of the sponsoring organization and must not seem insincere or mercenary. Boston's IDPR Group ("In Focused," 1996) advised that programs need to reflect the organization's business interests and offer opportunities for its expertise to make a difference. Efforts also need to be relevant to the values and interests of active and latent publics. Philanthropic programs must reflect an organization's core beliefs, actively involve individuals at all levels of employment within the company, and correspond to the organization's behavior. Focusing efforts in a small number of areas can magnify the organization's impact.

5. *Always monitor and evaluate the relationship.* Never assume that plans will carry through as expected or that the health of a relationship is assured indefinitely. This often requires simple actions instead of sophisticated research techniques. Richmond (1990), for example, advised the Sheraton to buy some tables at events hosted in the hotel both to show support for the organization and to ensure quality control during the event.

6. *Remember that little things can count big.* Small donations can come back to an organization many times over. Richmond's Seattle Sheraton, for example, had a company move its function from another hotel to its hotel because the Sheraton unknowingly had donated a room to a key decision maker's son's elementary school for a raffle in a town located 20 miles

away. Likewise, small insults can cost big business. It is a good idea to remember that, in a social system always in flux, every relationship has the potential to affect other relationships.

### A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR “ASYMMETRICAL” CAMPAIGNS

Another set of theories can help guide the manager developing a campaign. These theories, from communication, psychology, sociology, and marketing, take a more short-term, so-called “asymmetrical” view and emphasize persuasion. Although theories focused on campaign issues emphasize the asymmetrical approach, managers need to use them with long-term relational goals in mind. For example, although campaigns focus on changing a public’s mind or behavior, such as approving zoning changes that allow a company to move into a neighborhood, the manager must recognize organizations need to respond to the public as well, such as by helping develop a solution to neighborhood concerns about traffic. Theories of public relations strongly suggest that an organization’s long-term success depends on its ability to develop and maintain good relationships with key stakeholders. Even organizations taking the long view, however, need to engage in persuasion.

*Persuasion* (O’Keefe, 2002) is a “successful, intentional effort at influencing another’s mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom” (p. 17). This aspect of freedom distinguishes persuasion from coercion, which is an attempt to force compliance by taking away the target’s freedom to disagree. The definition of *persuasion* includes other important elements to consider:

*Success.* Persuasion does not occur unless the effort to influence another succeeds.

*Intent.* Persuasion occurs on purpose. Change can occur accidentally, but that is not persuasion.

*Mental state.* Persuasion often focuses on changing a behavior, such as increasing sales or the number of votes in favor of a particular issue, but changing behavior is not enough if attitudes do not correspond to the behavior. If attitudes and behavior conflict, coercion may have taken place instead of persuasion. On the other hand, sometimes attitude change, such as increased trust, is enough to satisfy organizational goals, without an associated specific behavior.

*Through communication.* Persuasion uses communication instead of force to achieve goals.

## Persuasion and Ethics

After a long discussion of the importance of symmetrical practices and social responsibility, students of public relations often worry that engaging in persuasion somehow is unethical. Indeed, the asymmetrical approach to communication management often gives public relations a bad reputation because of its us-them embrace of persuasion as unidirectional change. The media and other publics notice the lack of reciprocity on the part of the organization and resent what can seem like efforts to take advantage of others. Nevertheless, just as every individual operates according to personal theories, everyone engages in efforts to persuade. Even babies quickly learn that they must communicate their needs and desires to others in an attempt to have those needs and desires fulfilled. As grown-ups and communication professionals, we often need to persuade others to help us achieve our goals. But just as we learn to give as well as receive in our personal relationships, organizations at times must permit themselves to be persuaded by others, to be responsive to strategic publics' needs and desires. In other words, persuasion on behalf of an organization must occur in the context of the symmetrical approach to public relations. The PRSA Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations provides a useful yardstick for evaluating whether persuasive efforts remain within ethical bounds (Sidebar 13.1; see also Appendix A).

The values in the PRSA code of standards highlights this issue, that a member needs to act in accord with "the public interest." Several provisions address the importance of the persuadee's freedom to disagree by acknowledging that the withholding of important information violates a message recipient's freedom to evaluate the veracity of a message. As a result, the communication practitioner is expected to "deal fairly . . . giving due respect to the ideal of free inquiry and to the opinions of others". The member must act with honesty and integrity, communicate truthfully and accurately, refrain from knowingly spreading false or misleading information, refrain from representing conflicting interests, and be prepared to identify publicly the client or employer on whose behalf public communication is made. In addition, the practitioner may not corrupt "the integrity of channels of communications or the processes of government" or accept fees or other remuneration from anyone except clients or employers who must fully disclose facts.

In simple language, the PRSA code of standards means that persuasion must occur without resorting to lying or misrepresentation. Indeed, research shows that persuasion is more effective and has longer lasting effects when persuaders acknowledge and refute the other side of an issue. It is not necessary to use dishonesty to persuade someone; after all, if the organization holds a particular view, its reasons for the view are real. The key to persuasion is to communicate successfully the reasons why a target

## **SIDEBAR 13.1**

### **PSRA Member Statement of Professional Values**

This statement presents the core values of PSRA members and, more broadly, of the public relations profession. These values provide the foundation for the Member Code of Ethics and set the industry standard for the professional practice of public relations. These values are the fundamental beliefs that guide our behaviors and decision-making process. We believe our professional values are vital to the integrity of the profession as a whole.

#### **Advocacy**

We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate.

#### **Honesty**

We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.

#### **Expertise**

We acquire and responsibly use specialized knowledge and experience. We advance the profession through continued professional development, research, and education. We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

#### **Independence**

We provide objective counsel to those we represent. We are accountable for our actions.

#### **Loyalty**

We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest.

#### **Fairness**

We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

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public should share the organization's view on an issue or should want to participate in a behavior the organization thinks is a good idea.

In support of this perspective, a theory has developed based on research that has shown that the most effective campaigns treat persuasion as a relational situation in which everyone can benefit, instead of as a contest in which the organization desires victory and the public must concede. Managers must not view a campaign as an attempt to push a public to accept something the organization wants distributed, such as a product or an attitude. Instead, the manager should view a campaign as an opportunity to demonstrate to a public that the organization has something from which it will want to benefit. Public relations calls this a receiver orientation; marketers call it a consumer orientation. A theory called *social marketing* illustrates the value of this perspective.

### Social Marketing Theory

According to social marketing theory, purveyors of ideas need to think more like purveyors of products, who view a purchase as an equal exchange. The consumer deciding whether to buy a product must weigh the cost of the product against the benefits of having the product. If the benefits outweigh the costs, the consumer will buy the product. Similarly, the public deciding whether to embrace an idea must weigh the costs associated with embracing the idea against the benefits. For example, the cost of turning out to vote could include lost time, a missed opportunity to do something else, the need to go outside in bad weather, the need to move a car from a hard-won parking space, and so on. The benefits—the possibility of helping a favored candidate or proposal win at the polls—must outweigh those costs. This cost–benefit analysis is known as a *profit orientation*, and social marketing theory acknowledges that the consumers of ideas evaluate the degree to which they will profit from the ideas.

Social marketing theory views the consumer as the center of the universe. As with product marketing, success hinges on a successful exchange relationship with the consumer. The marketing of ideas, however, presents a tougher challenge than does the marketing of products. Although the gain of a small market share in product marketing can translate into large profits for a company, stakes often are much higher in social marketing, the need for 51% of the vote, for example. Solomon (1989) listed several other differences:

1. Social marketing often targets the toughest audiences instead of the most easily profitable. A rule of thumb for persuasion is that on a continuum of support, persuasive efforts are most likely to reinforce positive opinions, crystallize neutral opinions to become more positive, and

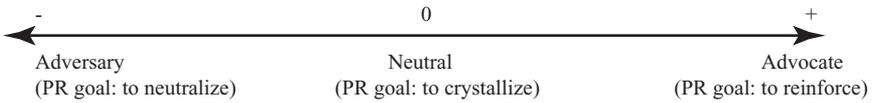


FIG. 13.4. The continuum of public support.

neutralize negative opinions. (See Fig. 13.4.) To move negative opinions to the positive side represents a huge, probably unrealistic, leap for a single campaign. Persuasion likely must take place in increments. As a result, social marketing often must acknowledge that change will take time.

2. Social marketing consumers often do not pay in dollars for services and products. The costs to them are perceptual, such as in time, reputation, ego, or guilt.

3. Political dimensions often exist in social marketing campaigns.

4. The products or services marketed often are not seen as valuable by the target public. It can be tough to sell the idea of a new school to the 80% of the public who do not have school-age children but who will have to pay for it in taxes.

5. Social marketers often have small budgets and need to acquire both clients and funding sponsors.

6. Too much success can prove disastrous if the marketer cannot handle the demand. Colleges implementing new register-by-telephone systems have had entire telephone systems fail because of the sudden overload. An 800 number can be overwhelmed so that no one can get through. An organization can run out of brochures, or pizzas, if too many people show up.

To apply social marketing theory successfully, the communication manager can refer to the model of the *six Ps* to answer the questions that give the campaign focus. The six Ps encompass the traditional four Ps of marketing—*product*, *place*, *price*, and *promotion*—but also include the *public* (instead of the consumer) and *positioning*. The combination of elements is known as the *marketing mix* (Fig. 13.5). Managers determine each element through research, given that each choice to guide a campaign must respond to public perceptions.

1. Who is the *public*? Everything else in the campaign hinges on the target public's needs, interests, and perceptions.

2. What is the *product*? The product is the focus of the transaction between an organization and a public. In social marketing, the product is the goal, whether this involves the embrace of an item or an idea or the adoption of a behavior.

3. What is the *price*? The price represents the cost of embracing the idea or behavior from the public's point of view. This can include time, sacrifices, cultural misgiving, and psychological discomfort.

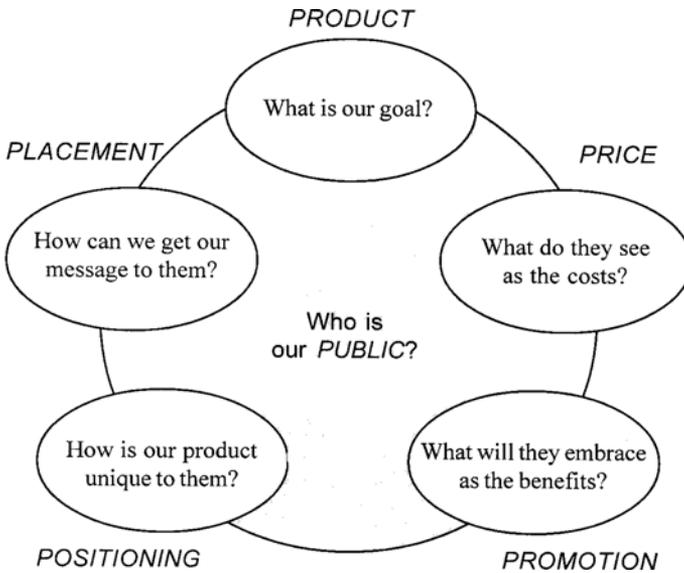


FIG. 13.5. The marketing mix. Elements of the social marketing model as applied to communication programs. The marketing mix includes the six Ps of public, product, price, promotion, positioning, and place.

4. What is the *promotion*? The promotion represents the benefits of the idea or behavior from the public's point of view. What benefits outweigh or decrease the costs it associates with the behavior? Promotion does not mean a simple advertising slogan but represents a summary of the cohesive message strategies that are used in a campaign.

5. What is the *positioning*? Positioning refers to what makes a product special or unique. What makes one event especially worthy of the public's attention? What will make yet another anti-drunk-driving campaign be noticed among the crush of other messages about driving, drinking, and safety? Positioning answers the "why should anyone care?" question and distinguishes the idea, service, or product from competitors in ways the public appreciates.

6. What is the *place*? The place refers to the distribution channels by which the public gains access to information about the product, service, or idea. Where can the public best receive a message about the product?

Figure 13.6 illustrates a social marketing mix based on the Truth campaign against tobacco use developed in Florida. The goal was to reduce tobacco use among Florida teenagers. Through a review of existing research and tobacco-use statistics in the late 1990s, the campaign designers had learned that teenagers already know that tobacco use presents serious health risks but that adolescent smoking rates nevertheless had increased

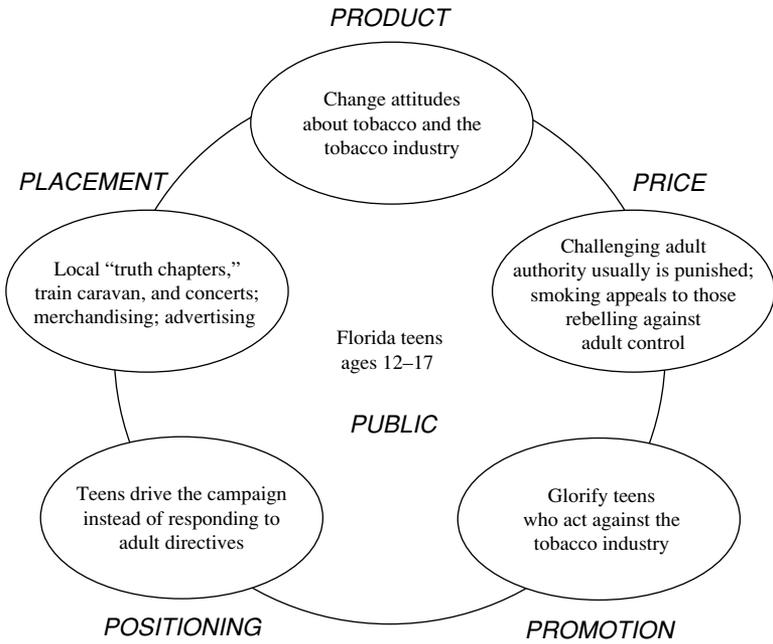


FIG. 13.6. Social marketing in action. From the Florida “Truth” anti-smoking campaign, implemented by the Office of Tobacco Control, Tallahassee, Florida.

by about one third in the previous decade. Much of tobacco’s allure seemed to stem from the perception of smoking as a rebellious activity against adult authority. The strategists decided they needed a *product* that would “drive a wedge” between teens and the tobacco industry: activism against tobacco use. What would acceptance of the “product” cost this target public, and what promotion could convince them to buy into it?

For the target *public*, teens 12 to 17 at risk for using tobacco, the health dangers of tobacco use clearly did not present a relevant cost. Despite their knowledge of tobacco’s physical effects, smoking rates had increased. To them, the social success gained from daring to embrace the danger and defy adults outweighed the health risks. From this perspective, the cost of *not* smoking could be high, because it represented caving in to adult directives (Hicks, 2001). The *price* of acting against adult authority usually is punishment from adults, but this activity invited praise from peers. The best way to *position* the campaign, strategists realized, was to enable young people to motivate each other to take on adults through *placement* of messages via grassroots advocacy, merchandising, and a mass media campaign. The *promotion*, therefore, was glorification of actions against the tobacco industry. The campaign designers held a youth summit

with 500 teens and continued to include teens as partners throughout the campaign.

According to Porter Novelli (Ruiz, 2000), the campaign achieved 92% awareness among Florida teens within 9 months. An evaluation by Farrelly and colleagues (Farrelly, Heaton, Davis, Messari, Hersey & Haviland, 2002) indicated that the campaign increased the belief among teens that cigarette companies want young people to smoke and lie about tobacco's health risks. The interpretation of campaign results has sparked some controversy because of the difficulties of isolating the effects of a massive, multipronged strategy, but the campaign eventually was implemented nationwide and appeared to contribute to a 22% decline in youth smoking from 1999 to 2002.

In another case demonstrating the importance of audience-centered and research-based communication, Publicis•Dialog, on behalf of Gardenburger, decided to position its veggie burgers as products for mainstream, omnivorous 25- to 54-year-old women instead of as a specialty product for funky vegetarians. They gambled on spending \$1.5 million to put a 30-second advertisement on the last episode of *Seinfeld* on May 14, 1998. According to Kevin Bush (personal interview, January 15, 1999), who supervised the campaign, the investment represented one seventh of the company's advertising budget for the year and brought them considerable attention for taking such a risk. The advertisement could have produced awareness for the product lasting an eyelash blink, but the strategy of a small player making such a big play attracted national media coverage—more than 400 news stories—which greatly increased public attention to the spot and to the product. The week after the spot aired, sales jumped 104%. Several months later, Gardenburger's share of the meatless burger market had increased from 35% to 54%. Although no strategy can guarantee success, Gardenburger's success illustrates how the audience-centered approach can give clients the confidence to embrace unusual or seemingly risky strategies that will cut through a crowded marketplace of ideas.

### Choosing a Level of Effect

Campaign designers must determine what type of effect they intend to achieve. As chapter 14 illustrates in more detail, it is much harder to change someone's attitudes or opinions than to change their level of awareness, shown as the base of the level of effects pyramid in Figure 13.7. Changing someone's value system, shown as the pinnacle of the pyramid, offers a nearly impossible challenge. The communication manager must know a huge amount about the target public and the social environment to choose a realistic level of effect on which to base measurable objectives for a communication program.

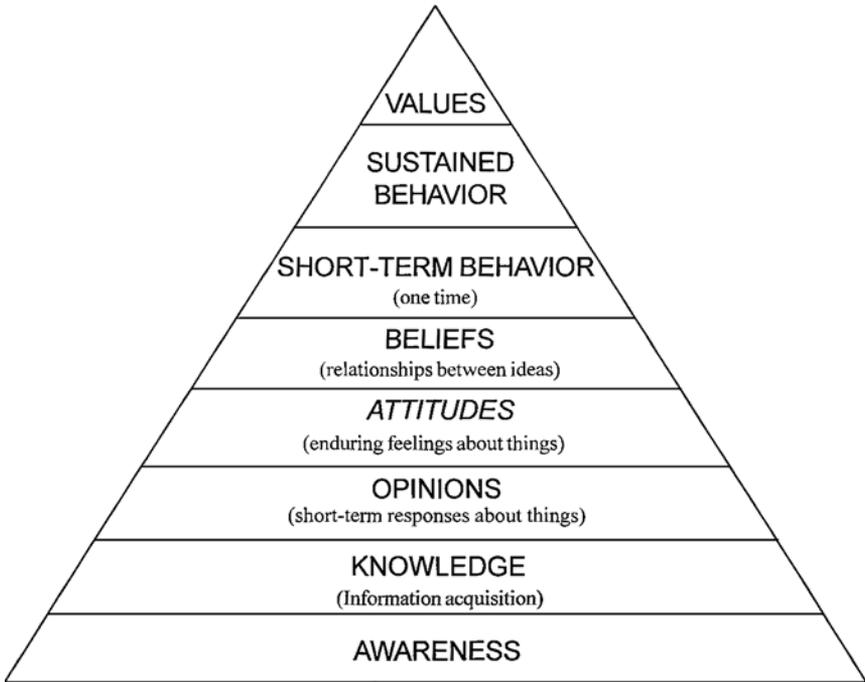


FIG. 13.7. The level of effects pyramid. Outcomes at higher levels of the pyramid are progressively more difficult to change.

*Attitudes* are learned, enduring, and affective evaluations of a person, thing, or idea (Perloff, 2003). Attitudes show that someone feels positively or negatively about something or someone. *Beliefs*, on the other hand, are pieces of information about things or people, whether or not these pieces of information are accurate. Beliefs can trigger emotional reactions—attitudes—but generally are considered to be more logically based. Attitudes not only often grow out of beliefs but also can contradict beliefs because people are not purely logical. On the pyramid in Figure 13.7, beliefs appear above attitudes because beliefs are more clearly based on information (or misinformation), and some theories of attitude and behavior change suggest that it is more difficult to change people’s minds if they are more systematic (information-oriented) in their responses to messages (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Yet, product advertising typically depends on short-term change based on affective responses. This body of research suggests that more affectively based attitudes change more easily than logically grounded beliefs. Nevertheless, managers must realize that attitudes supported by strongly held beliefs can be just as challenging to alter as the beliefs.

Some scholars and practitioners consider opinions to be equivalent to attitudes, but others find it useful to make distinctions between them. *Opinions* generally are considered to be somewhat like beliefs because they incorporate cognitive judgments (information). According to Perloff (2003), opinions also differ from attitudes because opinions are simpler and more specific. In addition, opinions can be more short lived. For example, people asked a question on a survey may produce an opinion on the spot in order to answer the question. They may not hold that opinion deeply or for long. As a result, some survey specialists ask respondents how strongly they feel about an issue along with how positively or negatively they feel.

Organizations often make the mistake of trying to change people's values, which is usually unnecessary and unrealistic. Values are like life goals. According to Rokeach, who developed a famous values scale still in use today (Rokeach, 1973), people adopt *terminal values*, which embody their ultimate life goals, and *instrumental values*, which represent desired strategies for achieving those goals. As shown in Table 13.4, terminal values include freedom, world peace, security, pleasure, health, excitement, and comfort. Instrumental values include politeness, ambition, obedience, helpfulness,

**TABLE 13.4**  
Terminal and Instrumental Values

<i>Terminal Values</i>	<i>Instrumental Values</i>
Comfortable life	Ambitious
Equality	Broad minded
Exciting life	Capable
Family security	Caring
Freedom	Cheerful
Happiness	Clean
Health	Courageous
Inner harmony	Fair
Mature love	Forgiving
National security	Good citizen
Pleasure	Helpful
Salvation	Honest
Self-respect	Imaginative
Sense of accomplishment	Independent
Social recognition	Intellectual
True friendship	Logical
Wisdom	Loving
World at peace	Obedient
	Polite
	Respectful
	Responsible
	Self-controlled
	Trustworthy

self-control, and fairness. A person's *value system* dictates which values are more or less important in relation to one another.

Because values develop early and tend to remain stable, targeting values for change is a divisive strategy, whereas appealing to people's values tends to be a more constructive approach. Attacking the target public's values is especially common among single-issue advocacy groups, such as those focused on animal rights, firearms access and control, abortion, homosexuality, and environmental issues. As Plous wrote (1990), however, value-based campaigns often offend the people they aim to persuade. Some political analysts, for example, suggested that Republicans severely damaged their appeal to mainstream voters in their 1992 national convention when they attacked nontraditional families to embrace a traditional family values platform. The Democrats, on the other hand, used their convention to promote the alternative message, that family values means every family has value. The Democrats had economic issues in their favor, commonly considered a major political asset, which meant that the Republicans could ill afford a strategy that alienated a large portion of the population.

When Republicans swept the presidency, House of Representatives, and Senate in 2004, many analysts interpreted the exit polls shown in Table 13.5 to indicate that the Republicans' appeal to values had worked this time to mobilize their base. Others, however, questioned this result and continued to express skepticism about relying on values as a divisive advocacy strategy. Exit polls indicated that the "most important issues" for Bush voters included "terrorism" (86%) and "moral values" (80%), with "taxes" following at 57%. Among Kerry voters, the "most important issues" included "economy/jobs" (80%), "health care" (77%), "education" (73%), and "Iraq" (73%). Among total voters, however, "moral values," "economy/jobs," and "terrorism" were nearly tied.

**TABLE 13.5**  
2004 U.S. Presidential Exit Polls

<i>Most Important Issue</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Voted for Bush</i>	<i>Voted for Kerry</i>
Taxes	5%	57%	43%
Education	4%	26%	73%
Iraq	15%	26%	73%
Terrorism	19%	86%	14%
Economy-jobs	20%	18%	80%
Moral values	22%	80%	18%
Health care	8%	23%	77%

Note: Some observers criticized exit polls for the 2004 presidential election as misleading due to the use of vague terminology that mixed hot-button phrases with clearly defined political issues. The debate illustrated the difficulties of measuring values and of trying to change them.

According to Gary Langer, the director of polling for ABC News, interpreting the results became problematic because the question phrasing used—"moral values"—referred to a hot-button phrase rather than a more clearly defined political issue (Langer, 2004). Dick Meyer, the editorial director of CBS News (Meyer, 2004), noted that the phrase connoted multiple issues with different meanings for different people. If the polling results "terrorism" and "Iraq" had been combined or if "economy/jobs" and "taxes" had been combined, either might have overtaken "moral values" as the top concern. He also noted that polling results in 1996 had "family values" (17%) as second only to "health of the economy" at 21%, when Clinton won re-election. He questioned whether a shift of 5 percentage points on a differently worded question held much meaning and suggested that Republicans would be well advised to treat the values data with caution and concentrate on building their relationship with the voters who considered the economy and jobs as most important. Meanwhile, columnist David Brooks (2004) wrote, "If you ask an inept question, you get a misleading result."

This debate demonstrates the importance of exercising caution both in trying to change values and in interpreting data about values. Accusations that people who disagree with an organization's preferred view hold substandard values make those people defensive and less willing to entertain other viewpoints. Demonstrating a shared value, on the other hand, as the Democrats did in 1992 and as some argue the Republicans did in 2004, can enable adversaries to find common ground on which to build understanding and, ultimately, consensus. It is not easy and it takes time to build trust, but some foes on the abortion issue demonstrated that it could be done, at least for a while. With effort, they realized that both sides wanted to avoid unwanted babies. As a result, they collaborated to form the Common Ground Network for Life and Choice to focus on campaign goals with which they can agree. As one pro-choice activist said in a 1996 article, prevention is the goal they have in common: "No one that I know in the pro-choice camp is in support of abortion" (Schulte, 1996). Projects on which they collaborated from 1993 to 2000 included teen pregnancy prevention, the promotion of adoption, and the prevention of violence in the debate over the issue. The motto of the umbrella organization that helped bring them together, the Common Ground Network, comes from Andrew Masondo of the African National Congress: "Understand the differences; act on the commonalities" (Search for Common Ground, 1999).

In another attempt to make partners among those who typically think of each other as enemies, the Jewish-Arab Centre for Peace (Givat Haviva), the *Jerusalem Times*, and the Palestinian organization Biladi have jointly launched a Palestinian-Israeli radio station called Radio All for Peace ([www.allforpeace.org](http://www.allforpeace.org)). They aim to explore various sides to issues related to the Mideast conflict, break stereotypes, and discuss common interests

such as health, the environment, culture, transportation, and the economy. They want to focus on “providing hope” to the listeners and preparing listeners to coexist in the future. In addition to their broadcasts, they provide online forums in which listeners can participate.

For communication managers seeking to bridge differences to build partnerships, the Public Conversations Project (<http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/index.asp>) can provide helpful resources. The project’s mission is to foster a more inclusive, empathic, and collaborative society by promoting constructive conversations and relationships among those who have differing values, world views, and positions about divisive public issues. It provides training, speakers, and consulting services with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation along with a variety of other organizations.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Efforts such as the Common Ground Network’s embody Plous’s (1990) point that “activists will be more effective if they are able to understand and empathize with people whose views differ from their own” (p. 2). Even a pure advocacy campaign can benefit from a symmetrical theoretical perspective on communication. This theoretical framework guides goal setting and planning. Then, within this theoretical perspective, the manager can turn to more specific theories that explain the communication process and communicators themselves. An understanding of these theories can guide strategy development, give a program proposal credibility, and increase the probability of program success. They are the focus of chapter 14.

# 14

## Theories for Creating Effective Message Strategies

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### Chapter Contents

- Mendelsohn’s Three Assumptions for Success
  - How People Respond to Messages (McGuire’s Hierarchy of Effects or “Domino” Model of Persuasion)
  - Just How Difficult Is It?
  - Problems With a Source-Oriented Perspective
  - Limitations of the Domino Model—Acknowledging People Are Not Always Logical
  - Why People Respond to Messages—Finding the Right Motivating Strategy
  - Other Theories That Explain Special Situations
  - Final Thoughts
- 

In the 1950s and early 1960s, communication experts noticed that mass communication campaigns were having little effect, and many believed the situation to be hopeless. One scholar caused an uproar with an article calling mass media campaigns essentially impotent, and another published an influential book asserting that information campaigns tended to reinforce existing opinions but rarely changed anybody’s minds. These followed on the heels of two other scholars who blamed the receivers of messages for failing to be persuaded by them. This pessimistic view still prevailed a decade later, when a man named Mendelsohn shot back with a more realistic diagnosis and a more optimistic prognosis. His ideas have had an enormous impact on the communication field.

## MENDELSON'S THREE ASSUMPTIONS FOR SUCCESS

Mendelsohn (1973) believed campaigns often failed because campaign designers overpromised, assumed the public would automatically receive and enthusiastically accept their messages, and blanketed the public with messages not properly targeted and likely to be ignored or misinterpreted. As McGuire (1989) wrote later, successful communication campaigns depend on a good understanding of two types of theories: those that explain how someone will process and respond to a message and those that explain why someone will or will not respond to a message in desirable ways.

After more than three decades, Mendelsohn's diagnosis still applies. Surveys and interviews with communication professionals have shown consistently that one of the major reasons clients and superiors lose faith in public relations agencies and professionals is because the agencies overpromised (Bourland, 1993; Harris & Impulse Research, 2004). In 2003, the failure to keep promises was the biggest reason cited by clients for declining confidence in public relations agencies (Harris & Impulse Research, 2004). Overpromising often occurs when program planners do not have a good understanding of their publics and of the situation in which program messages will be received. People from varied backgrounds and with varied interests are likely to interpret messages differently. Moreover, a good understanding of the problem, the publics, and the constraints affecting the likelihood of change (remember social marketing's "price") helps the program planner set goals and objectives that can be achieved using the strategies available in the time allotted. Mendelsohn (1973) offered a trio of campaign assumptions:

1. Target your messages.
2. Assume your target public is uninterested in your messages.
3. Set reasonable, midrange goals and objectives.

On the one hand, Mendelsohn's admonition that message receivers will not be interested in a campaign and that campaigns setting ambitious goals are doomed to failure can cultivate pessimism. On the other hand, Mendelsohn's point is that campaign designers who make his three assumptions can make adjustments in strategy that will facilitate success both in the short term and in the long run. The implication of Mendelsohn's tripartite is that research is necessary to define and to understand the target publics and that an understanding of theory is necessary in order to develop strategies that acknowledge the publics' likely lack of interest and that point to strategies that will compensate for it. Mendelsohn illustrated his point with an example from his own experience, which, depending on your perspective, could be viewed either as a major success or a dismal failure.

Mendelsohn's campaign tried to increase traffic safety by addressing the fact that at least 80% of drivers considered themselves to be good or excellent drivers, yet unsafe driving practices killed people every day. Long holiday weekends were especially gruesome. Meanwhile, most drivers ignored the 300,000 persuasive traffic safety messages disseminated each year in the print media.

Mendelsohn's team, in cooperation with the National Safety Council and CBS, developed "The CBS National Driver's Test," which aired immediately before the 1965 Memorial Day weekend. A publicity campaign distributed 50 million official test answer forms via newspapers, magazines, and petroleum products dealers before the show aired. The show, viewed by approximately 30 million Americans, was among the highest rated public affairs broadcasts of all time to that point and resulted in mail responses from nearly a million and a half viewers. Preliminary research showed that almost 40% of the licensed drivers who had participated in the broadcast had failed the test. Finally, 35,000 drivers enrolled in driver-improvement programs across the country following the broadcast. The producer of the program called the response "enormous, beyond all expectations." Yet no evidence was provided that accident rates decreased because of the broadcast, and the number of people enrolled in driver improvement programs reflected only about .07% of those who had been exposed to the test forms. How was this an enormous success?

Mendelsohn realized that bad drivers would be difficult to reach because of their lack of awareness or active denial of their skill deficiencies, and he realized that to set a campaign goal of eliminating or greatly reducing traffic deaths as the result of a single campaign would be impossible. As a result, Mendelsohn's team chose more realistic goals in recognition of the fact that a single campaign could not be expected to completely solve any problem. The goals of the campaign included the following:

1. To overcome public indifference to traffic hazards that may be caused by bad driving (increasing awareness).
2. To make bad drivers cognizant of their deficiencies (comprehension).
3. To direct viewers who become aware of their driving deficiencies into a social mechanism already set up in the community to correct such deficiencies (skill development).

### **HOW PEOPLE RESPOND TO MESSAGES (MCGUIRE'S HIERARCHY OF EFFECTS OR "DOMINO" MODEL OF PERSUASION)**

Evaluating Mendelsohn's success illustrates both the pitfalls of dependence on the traditional linear model of the communication process and the

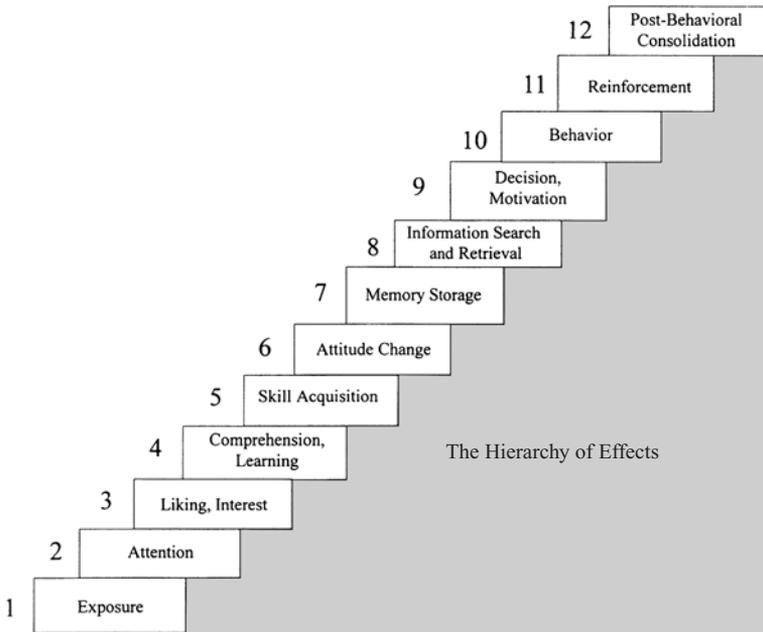


FIG. 14.1. McGuire's domino model. According to McGuire's (1989) model, message receivers go through a number of response steps that mediate persuasion decision making. Managers setting program goals at the top of the hierarchy may be unrealistic.

advantages of adopting a more receiver-oriented view, commonly known as the *domino* model or *hierarchy of effects* theory of persuasion (Fig. 14.1). The domino model acknowledges that campaign messages have to achieve several intermediate steps that intervene between message dissemination and desired behavior changes. According to McGuire, the originator of the domino model, effective campaigns need to acknowledge the following steps, which have been modified here to reflect recent research findings and the symmetrical public relations perspective. Each step is a repository for dozens, if not hundreds, of studies that have shown the importance of the step in people's decision making, along with the factors that enhance or compromise the success of campaign messages at each step.

1. *Exposure*. This, unfortunately, is where most communication programs begin and end, with getting the message out. Obviously, no one can be persuaded by a message they have had no opportunity to receive. Simply placing a message in the environment, however, is not enough to ensure its receipt or acceptance. Recall that some 300,000 safe driving messages had been ignored consistently by the target public before Mendelsohn's campaign.

2. *Attention.* Even a paid advertisement broadcast during the Super Bowl will fail if the target publics have chosen that moment to head to the refrigerator for a snack, never to see or hear the spot ostensibly broadcast to millions. A message must attract at least a modicum of attention to succeed, and campaign designers must not forget the obvious: complex messages require more attention than simple messages. Production values such as color can make a difference: Color can attract attention, communicate emotion and enhance memory (“Breaking Through,” 1999; “The Cultural,” 1998). Production values, however, do not guarantee success even if they do attract attention. Color must be used carefully, for example, because the meaning of color may vary with the context and cultural environment. Although orange may signify humor, Halloween, and autumn, it also can mean quarantine (United States) or death (Arab countries). Red can mean danger or sin (United States), passionate love (Austria and Germany), joy and happiness (China and Japan), and death (Africa). Quite a range! As a result, the International Red Cross, sensitive to this issue, uses green in Africa instead of red (“The Cultural,” 1998). According to the Y & R Brand Futures Group (“Survey Finds,” 1998), blue has become a popular color to signify the future because people across cultures associate it with the sky and water, signifying limitlessness and peace.

Message designers need to know that some aspects of attention are controlled by the viewer, and some are involuntary responses to visual and audio cues. A sudden noise, for example, will draw attention as a result of what scientists call an orienting response, a survival mechanism developed to ensure quick responses to danger. A fun activity, on the other hand, will draw attention because the viewer enjoys seeing it. Many communication strategists find it tempting to force viewers to pay attention by invoking their involuntary responses, such as through quick cuts and edits (e.g., the style often used in music videos). The problem with this tactic is that people have a limited pool of resources to use at any one time for message processing tasks. If viewers must devote most or all of their cognitive energy to attention, they will have little left over for putting information into memory. In other words, they may pay lots of attention to your message but remember little or nothing about it.

3. *Involvement (liking or interest).* Although research has shown people will orient themselves to sudden changes in sounds or visual effects, other research has shown that they stop paying attention if a message seems irrelevant, uninteresting, or distasteful. Messages that seem relevant sustain people’s interest, making people more likely to learn from the message. Social marketing theory acknowledges the importance of this step in its placement of the audience, or public, in the center of the planning profile. Everything about the campaign goal—its benefits, costs, and unique qualities—must be considered from the target public’s point of view. They care much more about how a proposal will affect them than how it will

affect your company. The City of Tacoma, Washington, for example, wanted to extend the life of its landfill and promote recycling. A 1995 survey of customers found that customers would recycle more if they did not have to sort and separate items. As a result, the city responded by offering a new comingle recycling program that enabled customers to throw all recyclables into the same bin. Recycling increased 300% to 400%, far exceeding the research-based objective of 200% to 300% and earning the city a Silver Anvil Award from PRSA.

An unusual characteristic to an otherwise familiar story often can attract people's interest. The relatively unknown issue of pulmonary hypertension achieved its goal of improving awareness by obtaining the cooperation of the U.S. Secretary of State and, as a result, a great deal of publicity. A fund-raising concert became an especially significant event when it took place at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and featured Condoleezza Rice, an accomplished pianist as well as the Secretary of State, as one of the performers. According to Representative Tom Lantos of California, who had mentioned to the Secretary that his granddaughter suffered from the disease, Rice told him, "We have to do something about this and enhance public consciousness. Let's have a concert and I'll accompany her at the piano" (Schweld, 2005). According to Orkideh Malkoc, the organization's associate director for advocacy and awareness, more than 450 people attended the event and the organization received coverage in more than 250 publications, including some outside of the United States (personal communication, June 20, 2005).

4. *Comprehension (learning what)*. Sustained attention increases but does not guarantee the likelihood of comprehension. Messages can be misinterpreted. For example, a cereal company promotion suggested more than a dozen whimsical ideas for getting a cookie prize, named Wendell and shaped like a person, to come out of the cereal box. Having a cookie for breakfast appealed to children, as did the silly ideas, such as telling him he had to come out because he was under arrest. Unfortunately, one of the ideas—call the fire department to rescue a guy from your cereal box—backfired when some children actually called 911, which confused, alarmed, and irritated the rescue teams. The boxes had to be pulled from the shelves in at least one region of the country.

5. *Skill acquisition (learning how)*. Well-intentioned people may be unable to follow through on an idea if they lack the skills to do so. Potential voters without transportation to the polls will not vote; intended nonsmokers will not quit smoking without social support; interested restaurant patrons will not come if they cannot afford it; parents interested in a civic betterment program will not attend a meeting if they do not have child care. An effective campaign anticipates the target public's needs to provide the help they require. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), for example, found, through a Burke Marketing survey, that many people had

a passive attitude about fire, many believed they had much more time to escape than they really do, and only 16% had developed and practiced a home fire escape plan. As a result, NFPA's 1998 Fire Safety Week promotion focused on teaching students about fire escape planning and practice, with incentives to encourage them to participate in a documented practice drill with their families. Although the Silver Anvil Award-winning campaign generated an enormous amount of publicity, the most dramatic result was that at least 25 lives were saved as a direct result of the families' participation in the promotion.

6. *Persuasion (attitude change)*. Although McGuire listed this step following skills acquisition, attitude change often precedes skill development. People who lack the skills to follow through on an idea may tune out the details, figuring it is not relevant for them. Attitude change is another of the necessary but often insufficient steps in the persuasion process. Sometimes, however, attitude change is all that is necessary, particularly if the goal of a campaign is to increase a public's satisfaction with an organization in order to avoid negative consequences such as lawsuits, strikes, or boycotts. Usually, however, a campaign has an outcome behavior in mind. In that case, remember that people often have attitudes inconsistent with their behaviors. Many smokers believe smoking is a bad thing but still smoke. Many nonvoters say voting is important and they intend to vote, but they still fail to show up on election day.

7. *Memory storage*. This step is important because people receive multiple messages from multiple sources all day, every day. For them to act on your message, they need to remember it when the appropriate time comes to buy a ticket, make a telephone call, fill out a form, or attend an event. They need to be able to store the important information about your message in their memory, which may not be easy if other messages received simultaneously demand their attention. Key elements of messages, therefore, need to be communicated in ways that make them stand out for easy memorization.

8. *Information retrieval*. Simply storing information does not ensure that it will be retrieved at the appropriate time. People might remember your special event on the correct day but forget the location. Reminders or memory devices such as slogans, jingles, and refrigerator magnets can help.

9. *Motivation (decision)*. This is an important step that many campaign designers forget in their own enthusiasm for their campaign goals. Remember Mendelsohn's (1973) admonition that people may not be interested in the campaign? They need reasons to follow through. The benefits need to outweigh the costs. In addition, the benefits must seem realistic and should be easily obtained. The more effort required on the part of the message recipients the less likely it is that they will make that effort. If the message recipients believe a proposed behavior is easy, will have major personal benefits, or is critically important, they are more likely to act. The

challenge for the program planner is to discover what will motivate the target audience successfully, an issue addressed later in this chapter. Elgin DDB of Seattle, when asked to help reduce Puget Sound curbside disposal of grass clippings by 5%, realized motivation would be an important focus. Focus groups and phone surveys indicated that the target group, male homeowners aged 25 to 65, had an interest in grasscycling but needed the proper tools to make it easy and practical. As a result, they arranged to recycle consumers' old polluting gas mowers for free at a special event and sell Toro and Ryobi mulch mowers at below the normal retail price, with an additional rebate. With a goal of selling 3,000 mowers, they sold 5,000. They hoped to remove 1,500 gas mowers from the market and ended up recycling approximately 2,600. And, as for their original goal of reducing curbside disposal of grass clippings by 5%? They more than tripled the target amount, reducing grass clippings by 17%, winning a 1999 Silver Anvil Award.

10. *Behavior.* Success often is measured in terms of behaviors such as sales or attendance figures. Marketing experts, however, know that getting someone's business once does not guarantee long-term success. One study ("Building Customer," 1996) found that keeping customers loyal can boost profits up to 80%. As a result, the program planner needs to do everything possible to ensure that behavior attempts meet with success. Victoria's Secret, for example, wound up with hundreds of thousands of frustrated web browsers when it promoted an online fashion show following the 1999 Super Bowl only to have the technology crash. Anticipating demand and handling unsuccessful attempts in a positive way can help cement relationships for the long term.

11. *Reinforcement of behavior, attitude, or both.* Most people are familiar with the phrase *buyer's remorse*, which is what people feel if they have second thoughts about a decision they made. Sometimes buyer's remorse results from a bad experience with an organization, such as an unresponsive telephone operator, which is quite unrelated to the product or idea that was the focus of a campaign. Program planners need to anticipate possible reasons for buyer's remorse in a campaign and make follow-up communication part of the campaign to ensure targeted publics continue to feel good about the organization's products or ideas.

12. *Postbehavior consolidation.* This is the final step in a message receiver's decision-making process. At this point, the receiver considers the campaign messages, the attitudes and behaviors involved, and the successes or failures encountered in implementing the targeted attitudes or behaviors, to incorporate this new information into a preexisting world view. By attending a special event promoting both a company and a cause, such as feeding the homeless, a message recipient may develop a long-term connection with both the company and the cause. In this spirit, medical centers such as the University of Kansas Medical Center hold memorial services

to honor the families of individuals who donate their bodies to the university. According to Jim Fredrickson, one of the attendees, the event helped family members feel more comfortable about the choice their loved one had made (Nowalcyk, 2003). Affecting the targeted public's worldview is the most challenging result for a communication campaign, but for programs focused on building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships, this result also is the most coveted.

### JUST HOW DIFFICULT IS IT?

McGuire (1989) suggested a success rate of 50% at each stage in a typical mass media campaign would be improbably optimistic. Given that level of attrition, a campaign exposed to 1 million people would gain the attention of 500,000, would hold the interest of 250,000, would be understood as intended by 125,000, would address the necessary skills and needs of 62,500, would be persuasive to 31,250, would be remembered at the time of the communication by 15,625, would be recalled later by 7,813, would be sufficiently motivating to 3,907, would achieve behavior change among 1,954, would achieve repeat behavior among 977, and would gain long-term "consolidation" among 489. No wonder campaign designers in the 1950s and 1960s thought campaigns were doomed to failure. The good news, however, is that this pessimistic view assumes each step has an equal chance of success, each step is equally important to the campaign, and the steps must proceed in the order delineated by McGuire's matrix. Fortunately, these assumptions do not always apply.

If we think back to Mendelsohn's (1973) campaign, in which 50 million people were exposed to promotions regarding the CBS National Driver's Test, 30 million viewed the program to become aware of the hazards of unsafe driving, nearly 40% of licensed drivers failed the test, and approximately 35,000 drivers enrolled in driver improvement programs, should we consider Mendelsohn's campaign a success or a failure? The campaign only achieved close to 0.1% success throughout the hierarchy of effects.

Given Mendelsohn's points about assuming that the target is uninterested, the need for targeting the audience, and the need to set reasonable goals, we must consider the situation before assigning credit or blame.

*Uninterested target.* Bad drivers are not likely to be interested in being told their driving is deficient; indeed, they are likely to be defensive. Everyone thinks everyone else is the bad driver. In fact, Mendelsohn found that 80% of drivers thought they were good drivers, yet almost half of licensed drivers failed the National Driver's Test. That means

that one of every two bad drivers either did not know or would not acknowledge their deficiencies. This means that Mendelsohn was correct, even understated, on the first point.

*Targeting the audience.* The CBS National Driver's Test did not broadcast exclusively to bad drivers. It needed to find them among all other viewers of the program, some of whom were not licensed drivers, were not old enough to drive, or were safe drivers. As a result, the campaign could not reasonably expect, nor did it desire, all 50 million people exposed to the campaign to enroll in driver improvement programs. Indeed, if that many people signed up for class, there would not have been enough teachers to serve them all.

*Reasonable goals.* If 40% of the drivers who watched the program took the test and failed it in the privacy of their own homes, many of them probably changed their attitudes about their own driving and perhaps took some extra precautions the next time they drove, regardless of whether they enrolled in a formal driver improvement program. The 35,000 drivers who did sign up for formal programs represented a 300% increase, in a 3-month period, over the previous annual enrollment in the programs.

Any public relations agency promising 50 million exposures and 50 million behaviors would be dismissed as naive and absurd. Any public relations agency promising a 300% increase in targeted behaviors, particularly for a challenging behavior to change, probably also would be dismissed as arrogant and unrealistic. In this context, Mendelsohn's campaign looks terrific. So from Mendelsohn we can learn that the definition of success depends on the viewer's perspective. Defining success in terms of desired receiver-oriented outcomes is more appropriate than defining success in terms of source-oriented outputs such as reach or impressions.

## PROBLEMS WITH A SOURCE-ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE

The common strategy of promising clients huge exposure can tempt clients to expect more impressive behavioral outcomes than would be realistic. With such dangers in mind, McGuire (1989) explained various fallacies that can doom a campaign, along with principles for counteracting challenges along the way.

### Common Problems in Application of the Domino Model

McGuire (1989) noted three fallacies that dog campaign designers with an insufficient grasp of persuasion theory.

1. *The attenuated effects fallacy.* Clients and agencies alike want to assume that exposure will produce success in terms of reputation, sales, or other desirable outcomes. The likelihood of continued success along each successive decision-making step, however, is probably less than 50% in a mass market campaign, making the final outcome likely to be less than 0.1% of the original number exposed to the campaign.

2. *The distant measure fallacy.* Sometimes program planners report results for attitude change as if it represents behavior change, or they may report changes in awareness as a representation of attitude change. If a program hopes to achieve behavior change, it must measure behavior, not attitudes, as an outcome. Using so-called clip counts as an indicator of awareness by collecting the amount of publicity accumulated misrepresents campaign effects.

The experience of the pop bands Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync, who released albums the same year, provides a dramatic example of this. The bands had quite different levels of success depending on how observers measured it. The Backstreet Boys garnered a *Publicity Watch* score of 1,372 during the 2 months including and following the release of their album, *Black & Blue*. This number represents a special method for media tracking exposure in print, broadcast, and consumer and trade publications from Delahaye Medialink. 'N Sync, meanwhile, managed only a score of 951 for the months including and following the release for their album, *No Strings Attached*. On the measure of exposure, therefore, the Backstreet Boys demolished 'N Sync. 'N Sync, however, sold 2.4 million copies of their album in its first week, compared with 1.6 million albums for the Backstreet Boys' album. Although both albums sold well, 'N Sync clearly did better on the behavior measure at the cash register (Stateman & Weiner, 2001). To say, based on publicity, that the Backstreet Boys had the more successful release would misrepresent what actually happened.

3. *The neglected mediator fallacy.* Well-meaning program planners can make unwitting mistakes if they assume elements that enhance success at one step will continue to enhance success at every step. For example, using Nancy Reagan as a spokesperson for the "Just Say No" antidrug programs of the 1980s helped the campaigns achieve tremendous exposure nationwide. But Nancy Reagan's credibility among the targeted audience of at-risk adolescents was not high. Likewise, having police officers deliver messages to school children in the "DARE to Say No to Drugs" campaigns might capture the children's attention, but it would do little to provide them with the skills needed to face possible ostracization from their peers. A spokesperson more relevant to their own needs and interests is important to such a campaign.

McGuire also offered several recommendations designed to help maximize success at each step. Even if a campaign cannot achieve 300% increases

in behavior, as Mendelsohn's campaign did, it probably can do better than 0.1% of those initially exposed to a program message if the designer successfully implements the following principles.

1. *The compensatory principle.* The good news is that sometimes things can balance out such that something working against your campaign at one step may work in favor of it at another step. If a simple, graphics-heavy message on television captures people's attention but communicates little information about a complex issue, a companion message, perhaps in a medium such as print or web-based technologies more amenable to careful consideration, can provide the necessary details. Not everyone will pursue the details, but if the initial message piques the public's interest, more people probably will pay deeper attention to the companion message than would have done so otherwise. If a political figure helps a campaign achieve exposure but is irrelevant to the ultimate target public, a campaign can include more appropriate message sources for different targeted publics.

2. *The golden mean principle.* Usually, a moderate amount of something, rather than extreme levels, has the maximum effect (Fig. 14.2).

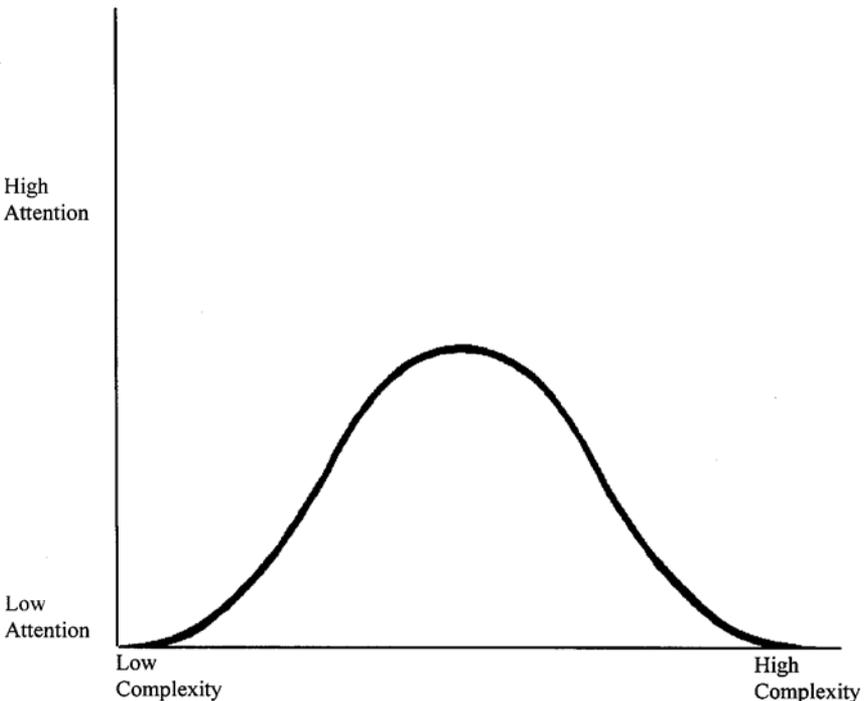


FIG. 14.2. The golden mean principle. According to the golden mean principle, moderate levels of production- or content-related strategies tend to have more effectiveness than extreme levels.

The program designer's challenge is to determine more precisely what level is optimal for each target public and situation.

This principle seems like common sense but can be difficult to apply because it can be challenging to determine what levels of humor or fear, for example, seem extreme to the target public. Similarly, the campaign designer needs to know what level of complexity makes a message incomprehensible, versus what level of simplicity makes the message boring. The golden mean principle, therefore, illustrates why pretesting is vital to message development.

3. *The situation weighting principle.* According to McGuire (1989), achieving the hierarchy of effects is not as difficult as it may seem at first glance because some steps will probably be easier to achieve than others. For example, publicity campaigns continue to hold such popularity because they often reach enough people who already have the interest and motivation to follow through on a message about a new product or service opportunity. Most people will not be interested, but if enough interested people read a well-placed piece on a new restaurant, they will need little additional impetus to get them to the restaurant, as long as the location is easy to remember. They already may possess the skills (transportation and money), the attitude (liking to eat out at that type of restaurant), and the motivation (perhaps an anniversary or birthday dinner is coming up). Likewise, people who want to do something they never thought possible may jump at the opportunity if a campaign addresses their needs (the skill development step).

The result, according to the domino model and Mendelsohn's (1973) assumptions, is that a well-researched, carefully targeted campaign will make more dominos fall without going awry.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE DOMINO MODEL— ACKNOWLEDGING THAT PEOPLE ARE NOT ALWAYS LOGICAL

Because the domino model provides such a useful campaign planning tool, it is the most popular theory of persuasion among communication program planners. In fact, Ketchum Public Relations fashioned a public relations *effectiveness yardstick*. The yardstick approximates the hierarchy of effects for easy application, by combining the steps of the domino model into three levels of effect (Fig. 14.3).

The first level, called the *basic level*, measures *outputs*, or exposure in McGuire's (1989) terminology, such as total placements and number of impressions. The second level, called the *intermediate level*, measures *outgrowths*, such as whether target audiences have received messages directed at them, whether they have paid attention to them, whether they have understood them, and whether they have retained them. This corresponds to the steps of attention, comprehension, interest, and memory storage in McGuire's model. The third level, called the *advanced level*, measures communication *outcomes*, such as opinion, attitude, or behavior change.

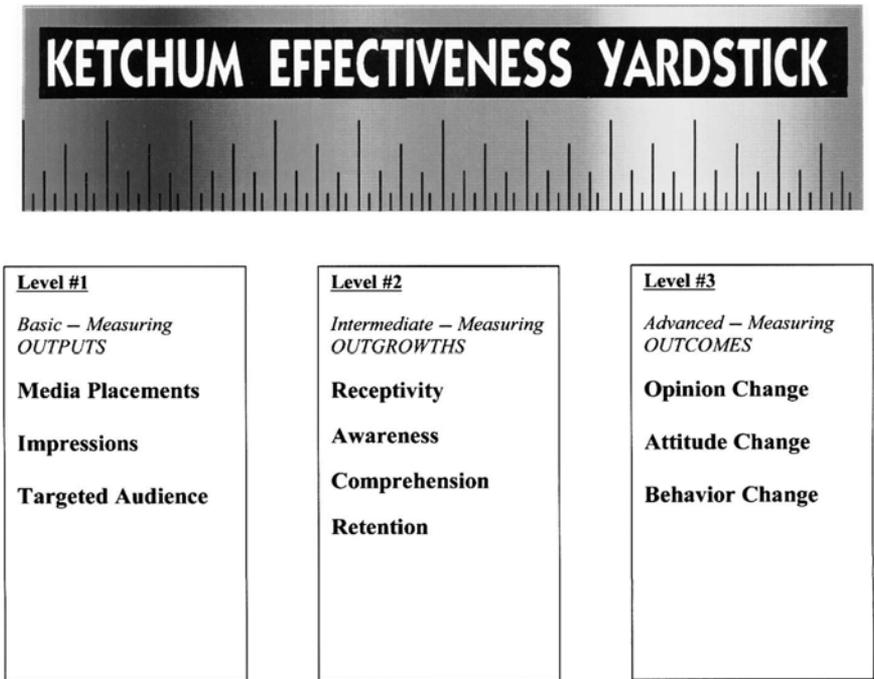


FIG. 14.3. The Ketchum Effectiveness Yardstick is a strategic planning tool that was developed by the Ketchum Research and Measurement Department. Used with permission from Ketchum Public Relations.

The domino theory, however, has one important limitation: It incorporates an assumption that the recipients of campaign messages will process them in a logical way, carefully considering the veracity of campaign messages to evaluate whether they wish to perform the proposed behavior. The truth is people are not always logical, and we do some things not because they seem right but because they feel good. As a result, it is important to consider another theoretical perspective on persuasion that explicitly acknowledges our logical lapses.

The most popular alternative to the hierarchy of effects theory is called the *elaboration likelihood model* (ELM). Developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) using tightly controlled experiments with limited samples of college students, this theory has its detractors and needs to be applied with respect for its limitations (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Its basic principles, however, echoed by other theorists pursuing so-called heuristic and systematic routes to decision making, provide a useful framework for communication program application, regardless of how the scholars sort out the details. According to the ELM, people process messages differently depending on their level of involvement with the issue. In this way, the ELM dovetails

with Grunig and Repper's (1992) situational theory of publics. People uninterested or uninvolved in a topic will not process messages deeply, but those more interested will be more likely to elaborate, to think more carefully about, the message.

The result is that the campaign designer can think broadly of two routes to persuasion. The first route is called the *central approach* and emphasizes logic and careful consideration. This is known more broadly as *systematic processing*. The second route is called the *peripheral approach* and forgoes logical arguments in favor of more emotionally or heuristic-based strategies. These strategies include elements such as likable, attractive, powerful, and credible sources. According to the ELM, decisions achieved using the central approach are more likely to last, whereas decisions achieved using the peripheral approach are more likely to fade or decay. The peripheral approach, however, can achieve changes more quickly because less thoughtful consideration is necessary from the message recipients. The central approach requires a larger investment of energy from the message recipient, making it more likely to succeed if recipients are highly involved or interested in the topic. If it succeeds it has longer lasting effects because people feel more invested in a decision that took more effort to make and that is based on facts instead of on surface cues. The peripheral approach is more appropriate for low-involvement issues or among target publics who do not care much about the issue. Again, it requires research to determine the extent to which target publics feel involved and ready to participate in thoughtful decision making.

McGuire (1989) called the ELM an alternative route to persuasion because it acknowledges that the central approach follows all the steps in the domino model, whereas the peripheral approach bypasses several steps, concentrating on elements such as attention, liking, and motivation to the exclusion of elements such as attitude change and skill development. Both the central approach and the peripheral approach require that the program planner understand what will attract and hold message recipients' attention, along with what will motivate them to follow through the hierarchy of effects necessary to achieve behavior change.

### WHY PEOPLE RESPOND TO MESSAGES— FINDING THE RIGHT MOTIVATING STRATEGY

To help campaign designers sort through the possible strategies for motivating target publics, McGuire created a matrix that summarizes hundreds of scientific studies on attitudes and persuasion into 16 categories. A modified version of McGuire's matrix is presented in Figure 14.4 to help the communication professional. Managers may notice that the top half of the chart, labeled *cognitive theories*, roughly corresponds to the central approach of the ELM theory, or so-called systematic processing strategies, whereas

Nature of Motivation State		Need for Stability		Need for Growth	
		Active	Reactive	Active	Reactive
Cognitive	Internal	1. Consistency (cognitive dissonance)	2. Categorization	5. Autonomy	6. Problem solver
	External	3. Noetic	4. Inductional	7. Stimulation	8. Teleological
Affective	Internal	9. Tension-reduction (fear appeals)	10. Ego-defensive	13. Assertion	14. Identification
	External	11. Expressive	12. Repetition	15. Empathy	16. Contagion (bandwagon)

FIG. 14.4. McGuire's dynamic theories chart. The chart illustrates different types of motivations that affect the ways people respond to persuasive messages. Adapted with permission from *Public Communication Campaigns* (2nd ed., Table 2.2, p. 54), R. E. Rice & C. K. Atkin (Eds.). Copyright © 1989 by Sage Publications, Inc.

the bottom half of the chart, labeled *affective theories*, roughly corresponds to the peripheral approach, or so-called heuristic processing strategies. Although heuristics such as credibility can be quite logically based, they often rely on the tug of emotion. As a result, the bottom half of the matrix also tends to emphasize emotionally based appeals. The top half relies more on logic and evidence, whereas the bottom half makes more use of raw fear, anger, love, and desire.

The top and bottom halves of the chart are divided again, to acknowledge that sometimes people are motivated by the need for stability because utter chaos would make life too unpredictable and uncomfortable, and sometimes people are motivated by the desire to grow, such as by the desire to become smarter, or more successful, or more independent, or more happy.

The most effective campaign probably will combine various strategies from the matrix to address the needs and interests possessed by different target publics or to address the challenges presented at different steps in the persuasion process. For example, a campaign might use an affective strategy (i.e., a heuristic drawn from the bottom half of the matrix) to pique the public's interest in an issue and follow that with a more logically based message (from the top half of the matrix) to deepen the public's understanding of the issue. Remember that virtually no effective campaign will forgo emotional appeals as part of its strategic mix. A dry recitation of information attracts little attention, interest, or motivation except from the most dedicated target publics. As a result, even logically based strategies tend to incorporate affective elements. This is why it is better to think of the top half of the matrix as systematic approaches (not emotion-free approaches) and the bottom half as heuristic (primarily but not exclusively

emotion based). Again, research and pretesting are required to determine which among the following strategies is most appropriate for a given communication program or campaign.

### Logical Strategies

The first half of McGuire's (1989) dynamic theories matrix focuses on primarily logic-based appeals. On the whole, logical appeals serve as useful strategies for publics who have an interest in a topic and some motivation to ponder it. For issues about which they care less or feel defensive, rational arguments may not work. Even logic-based arguments include some affective elements to make target publics think better of themselves or to encourage them to avoid thinking less of themselves. As a result, they include a range of positive and negative strategies, as follows:

1. *Consistency.* People desire to have consistency in their lives. If the campaign demonstrates they have two conflicting beliefs, they will feel cognitive dissonance, meaning discomfort from the contradictions in their belief system, which they will want to resolve (Fig. 14.5). The consistency-based message is one of the most popular campaign strategies because it offers a straightforward way to communicate that the public is mistaken for disagreeing with the client's point of view. The Family Violence Protection Fund, for example, challenged its target public that "if the noise coming from next door were loud music, you'd do something about it," implying that if the noise is coming from something much more serious such as spousal abuse, there is no excuse for domestic violence and no excuse for failing to report it. The idea that the reader would intervene for something trivial but bothersome yet not for something serious aims to create dissonance by making the reader feel selfish.

2. *Categorization.* A popular strategy among political campaigners in particular, the categorization approach responds to people's desire to organize their world into sensible categories such as good and bad, real and unreal (Fig. 14.6). If the campaign designer can change the way people view a situation, it may change the way they evaluate issues relevant to the situation. For example, a moderate Republican challenging a Democrat for office may apply the label *liberal*, or *tax and spend* to the Democrat to evoke a reliable response from targeted segments of the electorate, but the same Republican can fall victim to a more conservative Republican challenger who may relabel the moderate Republican as *too liberal* or as *tax and spend* to associate him or her more with the Democrats than with the Republicans. Such strategies, however, can stretch the truth or ethical boundaries and must be used with care. One candidate in a Pennsylvania Senate race, Rick Santorum, went so far as to relabel the firearms issue problem for Pennsylvania gun-favoring voters as his opponent, Harris Wofford.



## **When some parents crave their favorite drug, they'll even use their own kids to get it.**

When you tell your kids to get you a beer, are you unconsciously giving them permission to handle alcohol?

To kids, your most casual gestures involving alcohol can take on great importance. So examine any messages your behavior concerning this drug might be sending. And talk to them early about the responsibilities that go along with alcohol use.

Call 1-800-662-9111, or send for our free guide, "Talking To Your Kids About Alcohol." And make sure what you're teaching your kids about alcohol is you want them to learn.



Washington State Substance Abuse Coalition  
Talking to Your Kids About Alcohol Brochure  
12729 N.E. 20th, Suite 18, Bellevue, WA 98005

FIG. 14.5. Example of a consistency appeal. This ad motivates behavioral change by pointing out the inconsistencies that exist between parents' inherent desire to parent well and their behavior when they do things like asking their children to get a beer for them. Courtesy of the Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Department of Social and Health Services, Washington State.

**“Loser”** is a harsh label  
for someone who isn’t  
getting enough to eat.



**Over 12 million children in America are suffering from hunger.**  
Hunger that is taking the energy they need to function every day.



We can make it easier on them. Simply by feeding them.

Call Second Harvest, America’s food bank network,  
at **1-800-532-FOOD**.

**SECOND  
HARVEST**  
TOGETHER WE’RE  
HUNGER’S HOPE

[www.secondharvest.org](http://www.secondharvest.org)

FIG. 14.6. Example of a categorization appeal. This ad cultivates a sympathetic response from readers by pointing out someone labeled a loser because they seem to have poor athletic skills may be suffering from hunger instead. Courtesy of the Ad Council.

Santorum's direct mail piece suggested Wofford should be targeted to rid Pennsylvania of the gun control problem. The piece, with Wofford's name imprinted in the center of a target, not only looked as if it was meant for real target shooting but also was offered for sale as such.

3. *Noetic or attribution.* Sometimes the campaigner prefers to take a more positive approach to people's desire for consistency. The noetic approach relies on highlighting an association that gives the target public and the organization some common ground on which to share their perspectives, to encourage the target public to view the organization or its proposed behaviors in a more favorable light. One use for attribution theory is to point out a simple association between two things the public may not have connected previously, such as CARE, a social assistance organization, and Starbucks coffee. Working Assets long-distance service has used the strategy to appeal to consumers who favor nonprofit causes such as Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, and Planned Parenthood. Each year they accept nominations and survey their customers to choose the beneficiaries for the following year.

Of course, communication managers must use such strategies carefully. Appealing to consumers who favor Greenpeace and Planned Parenthood can alienate others who despise those organizations. Another use is to attribute the cause of a problem to a desired issue instead of an undesired issue. For example, some businesses might prefer to attribute the reason for a problem, such as diminished salmon runs, to dammed-up rivers instead of to a complex variety of environmental factors. In this way an organization can deflect blame from its own environmental practices to one cause.

In another creative application of this strategy, the Learning to Give project of the Council of Michigan Foundations encourages schools to teach children to make philanthropy a priority by associating it with the regular curriculum. In one case, a Jewish day school in Palo Alto, California, has tried to instill a philanthropic mind-set in its students by creating an association between charitable giving and celebrations upon which the children commonly *receive* gifts. The students research potential recipient organizations, contribute money into a common fund instead of giving each other gifts, make presentations to each other about the prospective charities, and then make decisions about how to allocate the money (Alexander, 2004).

4. *Inductional.* This approach can be called the *coupon* approach because it endeavors to arrange a situation to induce the desired behavior without changing an attitude first. Instead, the campaign follows the behavior change with an appeal to change corresponding attitudes. For example, people might attend a rock concert benefiting the homeless out of a desire to hear the music and see the stars. Once at the concert, they might receive a pitch to support the targeted charity.

One technique that became popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s incorporated customized address labels into direct-mail solicitations. For

this tactic to succeed from a public relations standpoint, designers must remember to include the organization's easily identifiable name, slogan, or symbol on the labels. Even if the prospective donor does not contribute, they can help to spread the organization's message simply by using the labels. They also receive a personal reminder of the (albeit tiny) investment the organization has made in them every time they use the labels. Some direct-mail strategists question whether the technique's popularity has diluted its effectiveness (Schachter, 2004), but campaign evaluators must remember that the labels may increase awareness and involvement and therefore the potential for a delayed return on investment.

5. *Autonomy*. This strategy appeals to people's desire for independence. Particularly in the United States, individualist-minded publics do not want to be bossed around. Appealing to their desire to be self-sovereign sometimes can help an organization develop a convincing message. Organizations that believe their own sovereignty is under attack often resort to this strategy, hoping targeted publics will share their outrage. For example, Voters for Choice told readers of the *New York Times* that "you have the right to remain silent," displaying a tombstone with the name of Dr. David Gunn, who had been killed for practicing abortion, "but your silence can and will be used against you by anti-choice terrorists." Sometimes the strategy can work with an ironic twist, in an attempt to convince people that giving up some freedom, such as by following the rules in a wilderness park, actually will gain them more freedom by ensuring they can enjoy the peace and quiet themselves.

6. *Problem solver*. Another favorite campaign strategy, the problem-solver approach, simply shows a problem and demonstrates the favored way to solve the problem. Not enough people can afford to go to college; give to the United Negro College Fund (Fig. 14.7). Not enough children have safe homes; be a foster parent. Use of this strategy assumes the target public will care enough about the problem to respond, which is a big assumption to make. Recall Mendelsohn's (1973) advice to assume the opposite, that the audience is uninterested. Campaigns that neglect to confirm this assumption through research risk failure.

When the assumption holds, however, the results can be impressive. It worked for Beaufort County, South Carolina, which had to persuade voters to approve a 1% sales tax increase to pay for improving a dangerous 13-mile stretch of road and bridges when the measure had failed by a 2-to-1 margin twice before. The carefully coordinated Silver Anvil Award-winning, campaign overwhelmed the vocal opposition in a 58% to 42% victory when White retirees, young workers, employers, and older African-Americans became familiar with the problem, that "The Wait Is Killing Us," and mobilized in support of the measure.

7. *Stimulation*. Sometimes the right thing to do seems boring, and some excitement can make it seem more appealing. A positive type of appeal,



## **MONEY CAN SEPARATE EVEN THE BEST OF FRIENDS.**

The United Negro College Fund helps thousands of deserving students go to college. But for every one we help, there's one we can't. Not without the funds. With your generous donation you can help ensure that everyone who should go to college does, including the best of friends.



Support The United Negro College Fund.  
A Mind Is A Terrible Thing To Waste.



**Call 1 800 332-UNCF.**

FIG. 14.7. Example of a problem-solver appeal. This ad encourages donations by suggesting that the way to avoid separating friends is to give money to the United Negro College Fund.

Courtesy of the Ad Council.

stimulation strategies appeal to people's curiosity or their desire to help create or preserve something with an exciting payoff, such as a wilderness area that can offer outdoor adventures. A group of police officers in Washington State, for example, although visiting middle schools with a serious antidrug message, transformed themselves into rap stars to deliver their message with rhythm instead of force. As they chanted about things students should not do or "you're busted!" the students gyrated and yelled the punch line back to the officers. The message got through.

8. *Teleological*. Just as noetic theories (creating a positive association) offer the opposite strategy from consistency approaches (creating an apparent contradiction that requires resolution), teleological approaches offer the positive alternative to problem-solver approaches. Teleological means heavenlike, and the approach relies on showing what the world would look like if a problem already had been solved (Fig. 14.8). This is a useful strategy for incumbent candidates for political office who wish to show their service has made a positive difference for their constituents. In other cases, the target public is shown the ideal result of implementing a desired behavior, along with a script advising how to make the ideal result become reality. A fund-raising promotion for the National Wall of Tolerance not only provided a sketch of the proposed monument but also provided a mock-up of the wall with the solicited donor's name already inscribed on it.

### Affective/Heuristic Strategies

The second half of McGuire's (1989) dynamic theories matrix focuses on heuristic-based, often more emotionally charged, appeals. On the whole, emotional appeals serve as useful nudges for undecided or uninterested target publics. For issues that require complex consideration, however, or for which a target public has a deeply held view that counters the sponsoring organization's view, emotional appeals can accomplish little or, even worse, can backfire. They, too, include a range of positive and negative approaches:

9. *Tension-reduction (fear appeals)*. This strategy attempts to produce tension or fear in the message recipient, which makes the target public uncomfortable and in need of a solution that will reduce the tension. It is the emotional parallel to the consistency-cognitive dissonance approach, which aims to create or highlight a contradiction in the target public's beliefs and behaviors they will want to resolve. The tension-reduction strategy is particularly popular among health campaigners, who try to scare the public into more healthy habits.

The problem with fear appeals, however, is that they can backfire badly if not applied with precision. One weakness in fear appeals is a failure



## **SHE'S A DOCTOR TODAY BECAUSE HER ROLE MODELS WEREN'T MODELS.**

She's delivered babies in rural South Carolina, performed surgery while on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana and treated tropical diseases in The Gambia in West Africa.

Dr. Nicole Lang is a role model for girls today thanks to the role models she had growing up — parents and a grandmother who were education advocates.

Show your daughter how achieving in math and science in school can open doors for her in the future.

Call 1-800-WCC-4-GIRLS. Or visit us on the Internet at <http://www.academic.org>.



Women's College Coalition

FIG. 14.8. Example of a teleological appeal. Instead of demonstrating a problem that needs a solution, this ad attempts to encourage involvement by demonstrating the positive results that can come from giving someone high expectations for themselves. Courtesy of the Ad Council.

to resolve the tension in the message. Threatening a target public with a dire outcome (usually death) linked to a behavior, such as drug use or eating habits, without showing how the problem can be fixed and how the situation might look with the problem resolved can make the target public resent the message and the messenger. Another problem is the use of extreme or unrealistic levels of fear, such as the Partnership for a Drug-Free America's admonition that equated the use of marijuana with Russian roulette. Because the production of fear appeals is filled with so many pitfalls and the effects of fear appeals are so difficult to predict, they are best avoided. Although appropriate in some situations, such appeals must be well researched. Clients who cannot be dissuaded from using a fear appeal simply must build a large pretesting budget into the project.

10. *Ego defensive*. The ego-defensive approach sets up a situation in which the target public will associate smartness and success with the desired attitude or behavior, whereas failure is associated with the refusal to adopt the message. This approach can be used in both a positive and a negative application. For example, the Business Alliance for a New New York produced messages promising that "you don't have to be a genius to understand the benefits of doing business in New York. (But if you are, you'll have plenty of company.)" Meanwhile, the Illinois Department of Public Health and Golin/Harris International focused on making safe-sex decisions "cool" in awkward situations. Research designed to ensure that the appeal would not backfire included mall intercepts of 200 teens, a 33-member teen advisory panel, feedback from high-risk adolescents via state-funded organizations, and message testing using quantitative and qualitative methods.

On the other hand, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America produced messages offering "ten ugly facts for beautiful young women," in an attempt to make use of cocaine seem ego threatening. The connection between the ugly facts and the strong desire for physical appeal unfortunately was not made clearly enough. Again, the danger of ego-defensive appeals is that they need to seem realistic to the target public and, therefore, require considerable pretesting. A more effective application of this strategy was employed by the Washington State Department of Health in its "Tobacco Smokes You" campaign, in which they showed a young woman trying to impress her peers and gain acceptance by smoking. Instead of looking cool, however, the ad showed her face morphing into a severely tobacco-damaged visage, which grossed out her peers and led them to reject her. Among 10- to 13-year-olds, 73% considered the ad convincing, 71% said it grabbed their attention, and 88% said it gave them good reasons not to smoke (Washington State Department of Health, 2004). The ad had a slightly lower impact on 14- to 17-year-olds.

11. *Expressive*. Just as noetic strategies take the opposite tack of consistency strategies and teleological approaches reflect the mirror image of

problem-solver approaches, the expressive approach takes a positive twist on the tension-reduction approach. The expressive appeal acknowledges that a target public may find the organization's undesired behavior desirable. For example, many drug users perceive real benefits to the use of drugs, such as escape from reality or peer acceptance. From a social marketing point of view, these benefits simply must be acknowledged, along with the real perceived costs of physical and mental discomfort associated with "saying no" to drugs. These costs can include the loss of social status and even physical danger. In perhaps the most well-known campaign incorporating the expressive approach, communities across the country hold all-night graduation celebrations for high school students that require students to stay locked in the party for the entire night to make themselves eligible for extremely desirable prizes donated by community members and businesses. The goal: Keep the celebrants from endangering themselves and others with alcohol and other drugs. The reason it works: The party and its incentives fulfill the students' need for a major celebration and their desire to keep it going all night long.

Expressive strategies probably have the greatest potential for making difficult behavior-change campaigns effective, but they are rarely used because they do not reflect the campaign sponsor's perspective. Various theories, however, ranging from co-orientation theory to excellence theory to social marketing theory, discussed in chapter 13, all lend strong support to the value of the expressive approach. Unfortunately, clients often run campaigns using strategies more persuasive to themselves than to their target publics.

12. *Repetition.* If you simply say the same thing over and over enough times, sometimes it gets through. According to McGuire (1989), three to five repeats can help a message get through, especially if the message is presented in a pleasant way. Many campaign designers interpret the three-to-five rule as a magic bullet guaranteeing a message will be successfully propelled into waiting target publics. Repetition, however, constitutes a useful supplemental strategy for an otherwise well-designed campaign and cannot be considered a sufficient strategy in itself.

13. *Assertion.* The emotional parallel to autonomy appeals, the assertion strategy focuses on people's desire to gain power and status. A popular appeal for low-involvement issues or products, the assertion appeal promises increased control over others or a situation in return for adopting the proposed attitude or behavior. The U.S. Army is trying to convince young people that they could win at war by creating a video game called "America's Army" ([www.americasarmy.com](http://www.americasarmy.com)), which is realistic and fun and which had attracted more than 5 million users by mid-2005, far exceeding the Army's expectations. The purpose was to pique players' interest, after which they could be encouraged to request more information from their local recruiter. The strategy seemed to work until the casualty

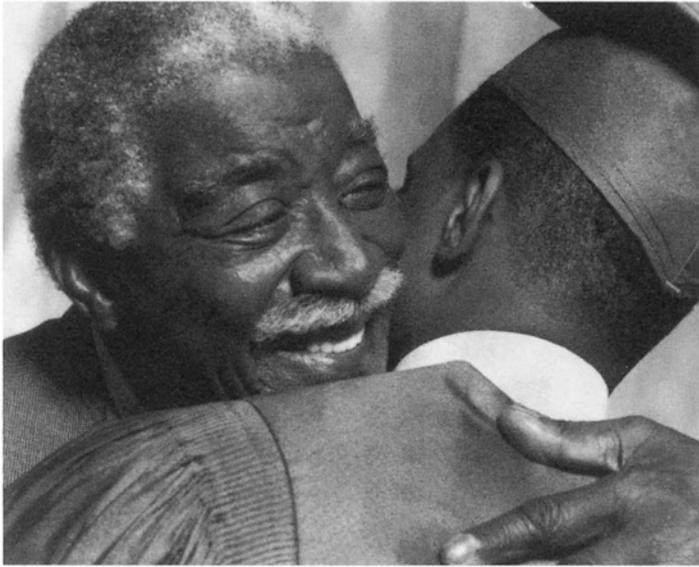
count in the Iraq war began to diminish young people's desire to serve their country by fighting terrorism. The game, however, remained hugely popular and may have helped to prevent a further reduction in recruits.

14. *Identification*. People aspire to feel better about themselves and frequently aspire to be like someone else. Often, they look to other role models who embody positive characteristics (Fig. 14.9). Campaigns commonly use this to create positive associations between a proposed idea or product and a desirable personality such as Lance Armstrong. Negative associations also can be made, but as with most negative appeals, they require careful pretesting to ensure relevance and credibility with the target public.

15. *Empathy*. Empathy strategies appeal to people's desire to be loved. Although most applications of the empathic strategy focus on how target publics can achieve personal acceptance from others, this approach can appeal to people's altruism and desire to feel good for helping others they care about (see Fig. 14.9). A simple but eloquent American Red Cross appeal, for example, noted that "when you give blood, you give another birthday, another anniversary, another day at the beach, another night under the stars, another talk with a friend, another laugh, another hug, another chance." In a campaign evoking similar emotions, Spokane, Washington-area animal welfare agencies and local businesses paid for a four-page insert in the local newspaper of classified ads featuring photographs of pets needing homes. Adoptions at the four local shelters shot up to record levels. One shelter director said, "We placed every single animal we had" (Harris, 2002).

16. *Bandwagon*. Making an idea seem contagious can make the idea seem even better. If 2,000 community leaders and neighborhood residents have signed a petition favoring the construction of a new city park, shouldn't you favor it, too? Mothers Against Drunk Driving has made use of this strategy by encouraging people to tie red ribbons on their car antennas during the winter holidays to publicly state their support for sober driving. The strategy does not do much to change strongly held opinions, but it can sway the undecided and serve as a useful reminder and motivator for those in agreement with a campaign message. According to the domino model of persuasion, increased awareness can (even if it does not always) lead to increased knowledge, skill development, persuasion, and behavior change.

In a remarkable example of the bandwagon effect, the Lance Armstrong Foundation created a craze when it began selling yellow, plastic LIVE-STRONG wristbands to honor the famous bicyclist and raise money for cancer research. The goal of the campaign, cosponsored by Nike, was to raise \$5 million by selling the wristbands for \$1 each. A year later they had sold 47.5 million wristbands (raising \$47.5 million) and had inspired a myriad of spinoff campaigns featuring bracelets to promote everything from breast cancer to political statements. Quite the bandwagon effect.



Once this man dreamed of going to college.  
Today he finally made it.

For more than fifty years, The College Fund/UNCF has helped thousands of young men and women achieve goals their grandparents could only dream of. We are proud to have made a critical difference in the lives of so many. But our job is not done. With your help, we will continue to bring many more dreams within reach.

**SUPPORT THE COLLEGE FUND/UNCF.  
A MIND IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE.**



1-800-332-UNCF

FIG. 14.9. Example of an empathy/identification appeal. This ad urges receivers to identify with the grandfather and feel empathy both for him and his grandson. By giving to the fund, they can feel fulfilled through someone else's achievement the way the grandfather has. Courtesy of the Ad Council.

The bandwagon strategy also can be used to demonstrate that a behavior must be “normal,” because so many people like you do it, think it, or look like it. The Oregon Dairy Council, for example, developed a poster-based educational campaign with the slogan, “What’s normal supposed to look like, anyway?” showing teenage boys and girls spanning the range of healthy sizes and shapes according to the body mass index (Fig. 14.10). The purpose was to counter stereotyped media images that distort what everyone looks like or should look like. Strategists need to apply a norms campaign with caution, however, because—as with identification—the target public must believe in the personal relevance of the norm presented.



FIG. 14.10. Example of a contagion/norms appeal. This poster encourages teenagers to realize that more than one body shape and size is normal and acceptable. Reproduced with permission from Nutrition Education Services/Oregon Dairy Council.

## OTHER THEORIES THAT EXPLAIN SPECIAL SITUATIONS

### Diffusion of Innovations

Another popular variation on the domino model provides useful guidance for campaign designers hoping to promote the adoption of an innovation. Innovations can be products such as a new computing tool or ideas such as recycling or changing eating habits. According to diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 1983), people considering whether to adopt an innovation progress through five steps that parallel the hierarchy of effects in the domino model. The innovation-decision process follows the way an individual or decision-making unit passes from a lack of awareness to use of the new product or idea. The likelihood of someone making progress through the steps depends on prior conditions such as previous experiences, perceived needs, the norms of the society in which the target public lives, and the individual's level of innovativeness. The steps include knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. Innovations are evaluated on the basis of their relative advantages, which Rogers called compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Simply put, an innovation is more likely to be adopted if it seems to have clear benefits that are not difficult to harvest, particularly if giving it a try is not particularly risky. Diffusion of innovations theory teaches that most innovations occur according to a fairly predictable S-curve cycle. First, a few brave souls give the new idea a try, and then the innovation picks up speed and becomes more broadly accepted. More specifically, people begin to imitate opinion leaders who have tried the innovation, and gradually a bandwagon effect gets started. Finally, most people likely to adopt the innovation do so, and the rate of change slows down again. Campaigns advocating relatively innovative ideas or products benefit from tailoring their messages according to where the innovation is on the S-curve.

Campaigns advocating adoption of an innovation must consider that people who are more innovative will have different needs and interests from people who are less innovative. According to diffusion of innovations theory, campaigners can think of five broad target publics: innovators, who are the first 2.5% to adopt a new product or idea; early adopters, who are the next 13.5%; the early majority, who represent 34% of the total potential market; the late majority, who represent another 34%, and laggards, who are the final 16%. People who fit in each of these categories have characteristics in common with each other. According to diffusion of innovations theory, people associate mainly with people who share key characteristics with themselves (called *homogeneous*), but they learn new things from people who are slightly different (called *heterogeneous*). People who are completely different will probably not be able to relate well with the target public and will have less persuasive potential.

## Inoculation

Inoculation theory looks like the mirror image of diffusion of innovations theory. The idea behind inoculation (Pfau, 1995) is to address potential trouble before it starts so that potential problems never gain enough momentum to create a crisis. Just as a flu shot can prevent a full-blown attack of the flu bug, a small dose of bad news early can prevent an issue from turning into a full-blown crisis. For example, political candidates expecting bad news to hit the media can present the news themselves, from their own perspective. Taking away the element of surprise or confrontation makes the news less sensational and, therefore, less damaging.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Theories explaining how and why message recipients make decisions in various circumstances demonstrate that purely informational messages and messages that appeal mainly to the client instead of the message recipient can doom a communication program. Remember that if the target public already shared the organization's point of view perfectly, a communication program probably would not be necessary. Because the goal of a public relations program is to increase the degree to which a target public and an organization share common perspectives and priorities, the organization controlling the message needs to make overtures inviting collaboration with the target public, instead of expecting the target public to invite the organization's perspective into their lives. Making a change is not the target public's priority. Understanding how and why message receivers think the ways they do can greatly enhance the communication professional's ability to build constructive relationships with them by pinpointing the strategies target publics find relevant, credible, and compelling.

# 15

## Practical Applications of Theory for Strategic Planning

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### Chapter Contents

- About Sources
  - About Messages
  - About Channels
  - Which Channels Are Best?
  - Media Advocacy (Guerilla Media)
  - Making Media Advocacy Work
  - Making the Most of Unplanned Opportunities
  - Final Thoughts
- 

The generalizations acquired from hundreds of studies about how communication programs work lead to some interesting conclusions about the parts of a communication program the manager can control. This chapter summarizes what research has demonstrated about sources, messages, and channels of communication. In general, the research has shown that, despite the complexities of communication program design, managers can follow some general rules to guide their tactical planning. In fact, most successful practitioners appear to take advantage of the lessons derived from formal social science research. The astute practitioner also realizes, however, that no rule applies to every situation, making a reliance on generalizations dangerous. As a result, managers should not consider the generalizations offered in this chapter an alternative to performing original program research. Instead, the principles that guide the use of the following tactics can aid strategic planning preparatory to pretesting.

## ABOUT SOURCES

Research has shown that one of the most important attributes of a source is its *credibility*. Some say it takes a long time to build credibility but only a short time to lose it, making credibility an organization's most precious asset. Although various perspectives exist, experts generally agree credibility is made up of two main characteristics: *trustworthiness* and *expertise*. Some add a third characteristic called *bias*. Because credibility of the source exists in the mind of the receiver, credibility can be tricky to determine.

Despite the importance of credibility, some research has suggested that it matters more for short-term attempts at persuasion than for long-term campaigns. The reason for this is that, after a while, people can forget where they heard a bit of information although they still recall the information. For long-term campaigns, research suggests people rely more on aspects of the message than its source, considering factors such as how well the evidence presented in a message supports the viewpoint advocated.

A second characteristic of a source is perceived *similarity*. Both credibility and perceived similarity exist in the mind of the receiver. Similarity matters because people trust (i.e., think more credible) people who seem to be like themselves in a relevant way. Message recipients may judge similarity on the basis of membership or attitudes. This is why presidents will go to work in a factory for a day, or presidential candidates will wear a flannel shirt or a T-shirt instead of a suit. They hope that doing such things will increase their appeal to the average person.

This technique also can help persuade people to do things such as take their medicine, wear their helmets when skating, or obey rules. In an airport, for example, an announcer advises that he has been a baggage handler for years "and I've never lost a bag." He continues on to admonish travelers that they will be more likely to hang on to theirs if they keep them close by and under constant supervision. The message, intended to reinforce airport policy, seems more personal than an anonymous disembodied voice threatening to confiscate unsupervised bags. Another announcer identifies himself as a smoker and tells travelers, in a cheerful voice, where he goes to smoke. In the first case, the announcer identified himself as an expert who can be trusted on matters of baggage; in the second case, the announcer established similarity by identifying himself as a member of the group he is addressing. Another announcer could establish similarity on the basis of attitudes by noting how much he hates long lines, just like other travelers, before encouraging them to have their tickets and identification out and ready before lining up at a security gate.

A third characteristic of the source that can make a difference is *attractiveness*, which can refer to physical or personality traits. Research indicates that visually appealing sources hold more sway over a target public than less attractive sources. Some scholars think that this is because people want

to imagine themselves as attractive, too, thus they establish similarity with an attractive source through wishful thinking. Because they do not want to seem unattractive, they do not want to do or think the same things that an unattractive source does or thinks. As with credibility and perceived similarity, attractiveness exists in the eye of the beholder, making audience-centered research essential for successful communication programs. Cultural differences, for example, can affect what seems attractive, and it is more important for a campaign to use sources that seem attractive to the target public than to use sources that seem attractive to the campaign sponsors (within limits). For example, a source with green hair, a myriad of pierced body parts, and tattoos will appeal to rebellious teenagers more than a dark-suited executive in a tie.

## ABOUT MESSAGES

Much research provides managers with guidance regarding the development of messages. Just as the Elaborated Likelihood Model and other dual-process theories assume two possible routes to persuasion within a person's mind, the findings from message research focus on two aspects of meaning: logical aspects and emotional aspects. The basic theme behind these findings is that messages need to be accurate, relevant, and clear. Effective messages include the right mix (determined through research, of course) of evidence and emotion.

### The Importance of Evidence

Evidence is important only to the extent that a target public will feel motivated to evaluate the authenticity of the evidence presented, but accuracy is a minimum requirement for any message. Messages with unintended inaccuracies communicate incompetence; messages with intentional inaccuracies are unethical and can be illegal, as well. Beyond accuracy, the most important generalization about evidence is that messages have more influence when they acknowledge and refute viewpoints that contradict the position advocated by a sponsoring organization. Consistent with inoculation theory (see chapter 14), scholars have found that two-sided messages are about 20% more persuasive than one-sided messages, provided the other side is refuted after having been acknowledged. If the message includes no refutational statement, the two-sided message is about 20% less effective than a one-sided message (Allen, 1991).

### The Importance of Emotion

Emotion enhances the appeal of a message because it increases the relevance of the message. Through emotions, people can feel something as a

result of a message even if they do not take the trouble to think about the information presented. Fear is probably the emotion most often elicited by campaign designers, but as noted in chapter 14, it also is the emotion most likely to backfire. Although fear appeals are popular for campaigns aimed at adolescents, such as to keep them off of drugs or out of a driver's seat when alcohol impaired, research has shown that fear appeals are more effective with older people than with children or adolescents (Boster & Mongeau, 1984). In addition, research has shown that people only respond favorably to fear appeals when they feel that they have the power to deal effectively with the danger presented (Witte, 1992). As a result, campaigns that do things such as warning adolescents about the dire consequences of becoming infected with HIV without providing realistic ways for avoiding it probably will fail.

Another popular negative emotion among campaign designers is anger. Political ads in particular use anger, much like a variation on a fear appeal, to encourage voters to mobilize against a villainous enemy. Anger can be a powerful motivator because people instinctively desire to protect themselves against danger. As with fear appeals, however, attack strategies can backfire. Political candidates know, for example, that attacks that seem unfair will hurt the sponsoring candidate. Another danger arises from the possibility of cultivating cynicism and distrust in message recipients, which will reflect badly on the sponsoring organization and can dampen the target public's motivations and interests (Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2001).

Positive emotions are easier to use effectively than negative emotions, provided people do not already have negative feelings about an issue or product. Positive emotions are particularly helpful when people are unfamiliar with a campaign topic, undecided, or confused. Feel-good messages are less apt to change strongly held negative attitudes. Two kinds of positive emotional appeals can be used by campaign managers. The first, the *emotional benefit appeal*, demonstrates a positive outcome to compliance with a campaign message. Positive emotional benefit appeals can be effective if they grab people's attention, but they are not compelling unless they incorporate tactics such as attractive spokespeople and production features. These tactics, called *heuristics*, are the second kind of positive emotional appeal. They abandon logical reasoning and simply associate positive images or feelings with an attitude, behavior, or product (Monahan, 1995). Heuristic appeals sell a mood or a feeling instead of more rational benefits. Research has shown that positive heuristic appeals are effective attention getters, but they do not encourage deep involvement or thought on the part of the receiver. People tend to remember the good feeling the message produced rather than any information provided. As a result, positive heuristics have only short-lived effects on attitudes and cannot be depended upon for behavioral change. Overall, a combination of positive benefits and positive heuristics garners the most success.

## ABOUT CHANNELS

It may seem obvious that different communication vehicles lend themselves most effectively to different purposes. Mass communication vehicles have advantages and disadvantages that make them serve different purposes from interpersonal channels. In addition, managers find that mass communication channels are not interchangeable; similarly, interpersonal sources such as family members have advantages and disadvantages over other interpersonal sources such as teachers or religious leaders. New, interactive technologies are the subject of much recent study and seem to be characterized best as between interpersonal and mass communication, having some characteristics of each.

### The Mass Media

The traditional definition of a mass medium is one that reaches many people at once but does not make immediate feedback possible. Increasingly, however, many forms of mass media not only reach many people at once but also allow varying degrees of feedback. Feedback is important because it makes it possible for message recipients to clarify information and for organizations to understand how people are reacting to a message. Organizations must be able to adapt to feedback as well as encourage accommodations from others. Recall that the co-orientation model illustrates that people need to agree and know they agree. To aid this process, radio offers talk shows; the Internet offers e-mail; television offers dial-in polling and purchasing; newspapers include reader editorials along with letters to the editor. Some generalizations based on the differences among traditional media types, however, still apply. For example, print media can carry more complex information than television or radio can, because people can take the time to read the material slowly or repeatedly to make sure they understand it. On the other hand, television can catch the attention of the less interested more effectively than newspapers or magazines can because of the combination of visual and auditory production features that make it entertaining. Radio, meanwhile, is accessible to people in their cars, in their homes, at work, in stores, and even in the wilderness. This makes it possible to reach target audiences quickly, making it a particularly effective medium in crisis situations when news needs frequent updating. The drawback of radio, however, is that messages must be less complex than messages in print media or on television because people depend solely on their hearing to get the message. They cannot see pictures or printed reminders to reinforce or expand on the message, and it goes by quickly.

Additional generalizations can be made about mass media overall. First, they can reach a large audience rapidly, much more quickly than personally

going door to door. As a result, they can spread information and knowledge effectively to those who pay attention. In terms of the hierarchy of effects or domino model, these characteristics make mass media appropriate for gaining exposure and awareness. The mass media also can combine a message with entertainment effectively, which helps message designers get people's attention.

Another benefit of mass media can be the remoteness of the source and situation portrayed from the receiver. Some things, such as scary or embarrassing topics (e.g., drug use) are better broached from a distance. Mass media can safely introduce such topics, which can be helpful to organizations ranging from hospitals to zoos. One experiment showed that people afraid of snakes could overcome their fear by being introduced to snakes through media portrayals, gradually progressing to the real thing in the same room. Meanwhile, hospitals have found that videos that explain surgical techniques to patients before they experience the procedures can reduce anxiety. Something experienced vicariously often becomes less alarming in real life. One reason for this is that the vicarious experience has removed the element of uncertainty from the situation. Research has shown that many of our fears come from uncertainty and from feeling a lack of control. Information, meanwhile, removes uncertainty and can provide more control. The results can be impressive. One study found that children who watched videos that took them through the process of having a tonsillectomy or other elective surgery—including visits to the operating and recovery rooms and some discussion of likely discomforts—actually got better more quickly, had fewer complications, and were more pleasant patients (Melamed & Siegel, 1975).

The mass media suffer from weaknesses, however. Anytime a message reaches a lot of people at once, it risks misinterpretation by some and provides less opportunity for two-way communication. The less feedback in a channel, the more potential there is for unintended effects to occur. In addition, people find it much easier to ignore or refuse a disembodied voice or a stranger who cannot hear their responses than to ignore someone standing in the same room or talking with them on the telephone. The ability to motivate people, therefore, is less strong with mass media than with interpersonal sources.

### **Interpersonal Sources**

Real people can do many things mass media cannot. They can communicate by way of body language and touch, instead of only through sound and pictures. They also can receive questions and even can be interrupted when something seems confusing. As a result, interpersonal sources can help make sure messages are received without misinterpretation. They also can offer to make changes. For example, company presidents speaking with

consumers who are threatening a boycott can eke out a compromise that satisfies both parties, whereas a mass-mediated message could make the consumers angrier.

Personal attention demonstrates that the target public's views have value. In addition, interpersonal sources can provide encouragement in difficult situations and can serve as models of a desired attitude or behavior. These abilities can be crucial for difficult behavior-change campaigns that require skill development and reinforcement. Thus, although interpersonal communication lacks reach, it often makes an excellent support strategy to a mass-mediated campaign, especially when targeting narrow audience segments. In terms of the hierarchy of effects or domino model, interpersonal sources can help with comprehension, skill development, attitude change, motivation, and reinforcement. This makes interpersonal sources especially important for communication programs addressing strongly held attitudes or challenging behaviors.

If communication programs cannot always include interpersonal sources, they can try to approximate them. For example, an antismoking program in Houston gained the cooperation of one television station and two local newspapers for a 3-month campaign. The media followed 10 ethnically diverse role models who quit smoking a few days ahead of schedule to allow for production requirements. They were shown participating in group counseling sessions, trying out various skills at home, going shopping, and relaxing. Viewers were invited to imitate the role models, half of whom succeeded in maintaining their nonsmoking status. Donated newspaper space explained what the role models were doing, included instructions to those trying to imitate the models, provided self-tests, and contained motivational statements. Drug store and grocery store personnel, teachers, large employers, and community groups handed out viewing guides and gave encouragement. Approximately 250,000 viewing guides were distributed by the interpersonal sources, 1.34 million were disseminated via newspapers, and 270,000 via company newsletters. Three months after the designated quit date, almost one third of Houston-area smokers had seen the programs. Over 10% of them had managed to quit for 3 months or more, meaning 3% of all smokers had quit during this period. The organizers estimated that the 20,000 to 40,000 new nonsmokers had gained an average of 1 to 2 years of life apiece, with a savings in medical costs averaging at least \$1,000 apiece. They estimated the total return on investment, therefore, in a campaign that had cost about \$100,000, to be a minimum of \$5 million over 20 years, with associated savings of tens of thousands of years of life (McAlister, Ramirez, Galavotti, & Gallion, 1989).

## The Internet

Because the Internet makes it possible for people to seek out the sources that make them most comfortable and also frequently provides opportunities

for interactivity, it can provide a helpful bridge between the mass media and interpersonal channels. Researchers find it challenging to keep up with the changes in technology, thus generalizations seem premature. Nevertheless, managers can rely on other principles and theories such as the information on credibility and accessibility—and use pretesting—to make effective use of the Internet. In the meantime, communication strategists continue to explore possible applications of Internet technology, such as the emerging influence of blogs. According to an election survey sponsored by *PR News/Counselors Academy*, more than one third of the 553 respondents agreed that bloggers “had a significant effect” on the perceptions of voters in 2004 (“Bloggers Blossom,” 2004). “Traditional news media” nevertheless still received agreement from almost 80% of respondents that they had a significant effect. In response to this growing influence, Pennsylvania’s tourism office hired six bloggers to visit key locations around the state and write about their impressions, beginning in June 2005. Each blogger adopted a particular focus, ranging from historical emphasis to outdoor adventures, theme parks, and nightlife.

### WHICH CHANNELS ARE BEST?

The information from chapters 13–15 should make it clear communication is a complex process that lends itself to few generalizations applicable to all situations. The search for the best solutions to a communication problem can tempt managers to draw broader conclusions from selected successes than are warranted, leading to risky, one-size-fits-all solutions. According to Chaffee (1982), communication experts sometimes assume that because interpersonal sources are more persuasive than mass media sources, or at least more difficult to rebuff, this means they also are more credible. And credibility is an extremely important attribute for a source. Chaffee, however, pointed out that studies have found interpersonal networks notoriously unreliable, and some studies have found people making up their minds based solely on information from the media, ignoring or rejecting interpersonal sources.

As Chaffee pointed out, it is silly to pit mass communication against interpersonal communication to determine which is more effective. The reality, according to Chaffee, is that *opinion leaders*—the sources from which people seek information or find influential—depend on the context. For information about the quality of local daycares, local parents may be the expert sources. For information about peace negotiations in another country, professional reporters are more likely to be the experts. Nevertheless, Chaffee noted that a few generalizations can be made about communication that can help the program designer.

1. *People seek information from the most accessible source.* Research has shown that if people are highly involved in a topic, meaning deeply

interested, they will go to the trouble to find information from the most credible sources available. In other cases, however, they rarely go out of their way. Some people develop habits of checking multiple sources of information, but others do not have the opportunity, ability, or desire to do so. This means communication programs should endeavor to make information easily accessible to target publics, instead of expecting them to seek out information.

2. *People give opinions more often than they seek opinions.* People like to make their opinions known. They do not like having other people's opinions foisted upon them. As a result, the most effective persuasion is *self-persuasion*, in which people reach their own conclusions, guided by information made available to them. To the extent that communication programs can set the agenda for what people think about and provide the basis on which they evaluate issues, called *framing*, the more likely target publics will be to draw conclusions compatible with those of the sponsoring organization.

3. *People seek information more often than they seek opinions.* People search for information, not opinions. In fact, they often search for information to back up their existing opinions. If they succeed, they may try to convince others to agree with them. To the extent that a communication program can make information available while establishing a common ground of shared values or opinions with a target public, the more likely the public will be to accept the information as credible and make use of it in ways consistent with the sponsoring organization's viewpoint.

4. *Interpersonal social contacts tend to be similar (homophilic).* This has various implications for the communication manager. People tend to associate with people who are like themselves because they share a frame of reference. Establishing similarity with a target public tends to enhance credibility. Credibility and closeness can motivate change, and people who are close can provide reinforcement when change takes place. This makes interpersonal sources critical for motivating and consolidating behavior changes.

5. *Expertise, followed by trustworthiness, are the most persuasive attributes of a source.* Both expertise and trustworthiness are aspects of credibility. Although similarity can help facilitate open communication and can enhance credibility, credibility itself is still more important. The key is to determine on what criteria message recipients will be evaluating a source's expertise and trustworthiness. Remember that interpersonal sources are not necessarily more expert or trustworthy than mass communication sources, meaning that they will not necessarily be more persuasive.

6. *The biggest effect of the mass media is more communication.* The previous generalizations necessarily lead to this conclusion. People receive information from accessible sources, and mass media can make a message highly accessible. People like to receive information instead of opinions, which

means that the media are more likely to spread credible information than to change opinions. People tend to associate with people similar to themselves and often use information received from the mass media to try to convince others to share their opinions. Finally, people can motivate others similar to themselves to act and can provide reinforcement of those actions. The biggest strength of the mass media, therefore, is that they can spread information and spark interpersonal communication that can change opinions and lead to action. Although this means mass media campaigns are unlikely to prove sufficient for a social marketing-style advocacy program, they are definitely good for something. This has inspired the development of media advocacy.

### MEDIA ADVOCACY (GUERILLA MEDIA)

Changing people's minds is no easy task, and just getting their attention can be a challenge. As a result, social marketing campaigns intended to change attitudes or behaviors usually require funds that enable a long-term, gradual adjustment process. Sometimes organizations simply do not have the time or the money to underwrite such a campaign. Instead of giving up, however, they can address the issue from a different theoretical viewpoint, called *media advocacy*.

The media advocacy approach acknowledges the hierarchy of the effects model, but it does so from a different angle than social marketing approaches, often striving more for shock value than for establishing common ground with the target public. Social marketing campaigns make three crucial assumptions that distinguish them from media advocacy campaigns:

1. Campaigns ultimately aim to change individual attitudes and behaviors.
2. Individuals ultimately have control over and are responsible for their own attitudes and behaviors.
3. Campaigns must convince and motivate individuals in order to change attitudes and behaviors.

Media advocacy campaigns, on the other hand, make different assumptions:

1. People's attitudes and behaviors depend on environmental opportunities and constraints.
2. Organizations and governmental institutions control critical environmental factors.
3. Organizations and governmental institutions respond to the public's agenda.

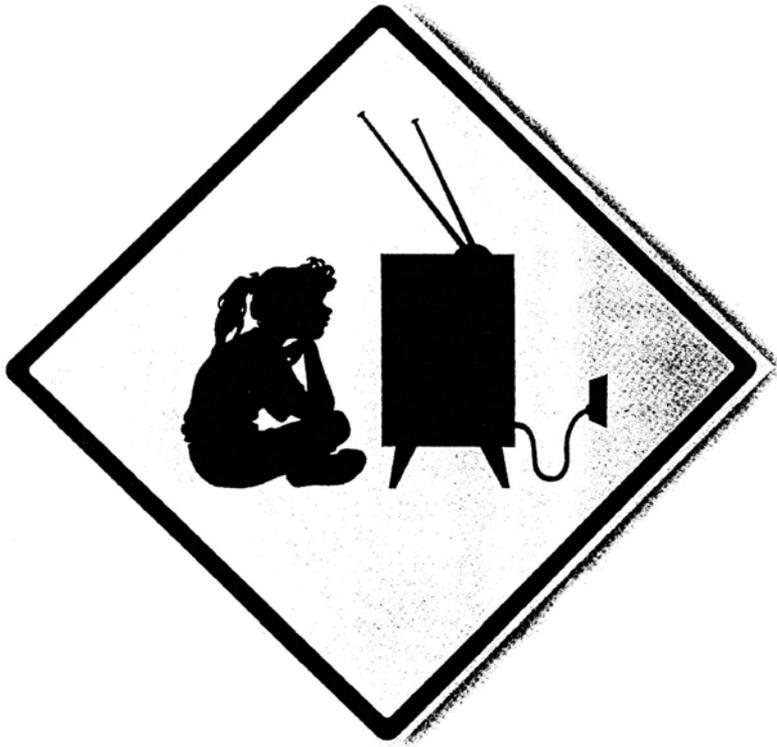
4. The agenda for public opinion can be affected by the mass media.
5. Public opinion needs to force organizations and institutions to alter environmental factors such as public policy in order to change attitudes and behaviors.

Both sets of assumptions have validity because human behavior is complex. The communication manager, however, must decide which theoretical strategy is most appropriate for a given situation. Both social marketing and media advocacy have advantages and disadvantages, and both have strengths and limitations. For example, because social marketing targets individuals, people who do change attitudes or behaviors will feel invested in the changes made. In addition, because social marketing tries to establish common ground with the target public through source and message strategies, social marketing is less likely than media advocacy to backfire (provided sufficient preprogram research and pretesting has been performed). Social marketing campaigns, however, are likely to require more time and funding than media advocacy campaigns because they strive for incremental changes that rarely happen quickly and can require a large investment of funds. People also resist change, particularly if they are made to feel defensive about their own attitudes or behaviors.

Media advocacy campaigns, meanwhile, focus on getting people's attention and motivating them to communicate further in some way, instead of on persuading people to change their own attitudes or behaviors. They encourage people to blame a company, public official, or institution for a problem instead of accepting personal responsibility, which can eliminate a good deal of potential resistance among the target public. Media advocacy campaigns often use shock or anger to grab people's attention and motivate them to turn on a perceived enemy under the assumption that public pressure may force the enemy to make a desired change.

Although media advocacy campaigns focus on mass media coverage, thriving on negative emotions and, therefore, on controversy, this also presents some drawbacks. As with any strategy based on negative emotions, the media advocacy strategy can backfire, with the public blaming the sponsoring organization. In addition, heated public debates rarely continue for long, and the media or target publics soon become bored and turn to another topic for discussion. The shorter time frame and strategy of creating newsworthy controversy can make media advocacy campaigns less expensive to run than social marketing campaigns, but they also mean the campaigns are shorter and changes can lack staying power. In other words, the attack strategy of media advocacy, sometimes called *guerilla media* because of the attack tactics used, makes it lower cost but higher risk.

Media advocacy, therefore, is the strategic use of mass media to advance a social or public policy initiative, applying the strategy of reframing public



# CAUTION: CHILDREN NOT AT PLAY.

Once, children spent their time running and playing. Today, they're more likely to be found in front of the TV. And that could mean trouble. Because lack of exercise can lead to weight problems and high blood cholesterol. Encourage your children to be more active. Fighting heart disease may be as simple as child's play. To learn more,

contact the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Box 36, Dallas, TX 75231-4596.

*You can help prevent heart disease and stroke. We can tell you how.*

American Heart Association 

This space provided as a public service. ©1992, American Heart Association

FIG. 15.1. Social marketing example. This ad encourages parents to take responsibility for their children's health. Reproduced with permission. *Caution: Children Not At Play*, PSA Magazine Ad Kit Winter/Spring 1992. Copyright American Heart Association.

debate. Social marketing, in contrast, is the strategic use of mass and interpersonal channels to achieve change among individuals, applying strategies directed at individual responsibility and motivations.

For example, contrast the two campaigns illustrated in Figures 15.1 and 15.2, both of which target television as a cause of societal ills. The social marketing version targets parents, encouraging them to take responsibility for having their children watch less television. The second appeals to people's anger and willingness to blame someone else for teenage pregnancy and violence in society. The ad, which appeared in major newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal*, made news, attracted contributions (which bought more advertising), and helped spark congressional hearings.

### MAKING MEDIA ADVOCACY WORK

Media advocacy recognizes that the media are a primary forum for challenging policies. As a result, a successful media advocacy campaign depends on the sponsoring organization's ability to make news. An organization may buy advertising space, for example, but the goal often is for the ad to make news rather than for the ad itself to persuade many people. Organizations buying such ads usually have much less to spend than the companies or institutions they attack (Fig. 15.2). For example, Kalle Lasn, president of a group that ran a parody of an Absolut Vodka ad that resulted in prominent coverage in the *New York Times*, has said, "Even though we're little, we take a big, large corporation, and we use these images to slam them on the mat like a judo move." To do this effectively requires several skills.

1. *Research.* It is essential when using swift and risky guerilla tactics to have confidence in their effectiveness. The media advocate needs to know what story angles will interest the media, what messages will motivate the public, and what messages may backfire. Data are needed to demonstrate convincingly the extent of a problem, including whether some people are affected more than others (people respond when something seems unfair). Research can suggest useful solutions such as policy initiatives, regulations, or the elimination of regulations. Research also can guide efforts to build coalitions, which can make a small organization seem more powerful.

2. *Creative epidemiology.* Creative epidemiology is the use of creative strategies to make dry information such as statistics more interesting. Often, policy issues are complex, and statistics demonstrating the extent of a problem or the value of a solution can be boring. Big numbers can be convincing but hard to digest. As a result, media advocates need to make abstract data seem more relevant and interesting through vivid examples and sound bites. For example, antismoking advocates can draw yawns with the statement that some 350,000 people die each year from smoking-related causes. On the other hand, they can create a vivid image in people's

**Shame on movies,  
records and TV!**

*Help us get  
one million  
petitions!*

**A GRASSROOTS PETITION  
TO BOARDS OF DIRECTORS  
OF ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY**

# We Are Outraged!

## And We're Not Going To Put Up With It Any Longer!

We're a group of mothers, fathers, grandparents and other citizens who are outraged at how today's movies, TV programs, music videos and records are hurting our children, our families and our country.

We're **DISMAYED** that today 1.1 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 get pregnant each year.

We're **SHOCKED** when we learn that two thirds of all births to 15 and 19-year-old girls are out of wedlock.

We're **FRIGHTENED** at the way violence and crime are spreading everywhere and threatening our children, our families and our homes.

**SHAME** on those in charge in Hollywood for an endless stream of films filled with **PROFANITY, NUDITY, SEX, VIOLENCE** and **KILLINGS**. For example, the recent giant movie hit features murders during sex, setting a new standard of perversion even for today's movies.

**SHAME** on TV directors for allowing the average child to see more than **200,000 ACTS OF VIOLENCE** and **33,000 MURDERS** by the age of 16 . . . even though directors **KNOW** that TV violence is implicated in **22% OF ALL JUVENILE CRIME AND HALF THE HOMICIDES** in America.

**SHAME** on the directors in the film industry which long ago stopped reflecting the values of most families and has now abolished the "X" rating, replacing it with "NC-17," so sex-filled, erotic, bloody films will no longer be barred from community movie houses.

We say the tragic price our children, families and country are paying demands something be done to end what's going on. Alone we can't stop it. But together we think we can.

The **REASON** for all the sex, violence, filth and profanity is with the writers, directors, producers, singers, actors, etc. But **THEY** can be controlled. All it takes is for the Boards of Directors of their companies to order them to stop! Remember when movies were wholesome family entertainment? We're going to insist that happen again.

## Together We Can Make It Happen

We're asking every reader of this ad to help us run it all over America ... **AND** send in the petition on the right. Every 2 months we're going to send every member of the Boards of Directors of the entertainment companies a copy of the ad and tell them the total number of petitions received. They're going to **KNOW** American families are outraged.

Spare us the censorship lecture — you in the entertainment industry. And this is not an appeal for prudery. All we want is to get the movie, TV and record industries to act responsibly. Our children, our families and our country are being hurt too much for us to remain silent.

Right now mail the petition below. Please enclose a tax-deductible contribution to help pay for another ad like this. We'll do the rest.

A PETITION To The Members of The Boards of Directors of Every Major TV Network, Film, Music and Record Company

### Mail To:

**American Family Association, Dept. J70, P O. Drawer 2440/107 Parkgate Drive, Tupelo MS 38803**

I want to be part of this Grass Roots petition drive and help run this ad all over America. You agree to notify the Directors of the entertainment companies every 2 months of the progress of this effort, and you agree all funds will be used for running additional ads. With this understanding I am enclosing a tax-deductible contribution of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to help pay for another ad and get those in charge to **SET STANDARDS** and **ENFORCE THEM**.

### Please return this petition today!

It is the total number of petitions which come in that is important. This project is so important that even if you can't send a contribution please mail in this petition to add to the total number we receive. Thanks.

Please print legibly.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

A Project of American Family Association  
Dr. Donald E. Wildmon, President  
Approved by The I.R.S. as a 501-c-3  
not for profit organization



1-800-3BE-WISE

FIG. 15.2. Media advocacy example. This ad encourages the public to blame the media for a variety of health problems in society. According to Allen Wildmon, public relations director for the American Family Association, Inc., the ad generated almost 900,000 responses.

Ad courtesy of the American Family Association, Inc.

minds if they say instead that “1,000 people quit smoking every day—by dying. That is equivalent to two fully loaded jumbo jets crashing every day, with no survivors,” or 920 crashes per year.

Techniques for creating such vivid imagery abound. Media advocates can turn the abstract into the concrete by *localizing* information (e.g., indicating how many in a community have died from smoking, or AIDS, or drunk-driving accidents); using *relativity techniques* by recharacterizing numbers into a more meaningful form (e.g., saying the alcohol industry spends approximately \$225,000 every hour of every day to advertise, instead of saying they spend more than \$2 billion per year); and *showing effects of public policy* by highlighting individuals who have been affected. The Texas Transportation Institute, for example, “drove home” the point that traffic delays have a real cost by noting that the time people spent in traffic delays in 2003 added up to 3.7 billion hours, a number that is big but has no context until the Institute reveals that this equals 400,000 years. The information really grabs the reader’s attention when the Institute explain that this time span would stretch back to the era when Homo sapiens were just beginning to appear—way before anyone had a car. The Institute helpfully added that the fuel sacrificed to traffic jams could run every car in the country for six days (“Commutes Just,” 2005).

3. *Issue framing.* Usually, media advocacy campaigns challenge the public’s complacency on an issue. To jar people into listening to a perspective they have not heard before requires finding an angle that will attract attention. For this reason, media advocates often focus on industry practices instead of on individual behavior, or attempt to delegitimize the enemy by exposing their supposedly exploitative and unethical practices.

This requires using familiar symbols to create an advantage. Industries and organizations targeted by media advocates often have carved out a comfortable niche in society through the skilled use of symbols to associate themselves with values shared by the public. For example, tobacco companies often appeal to the public’s desire for freedom by claiming censorship or an assault on the First Amendment. Increasingly, media advocates have found it more productive to co-opt the enemy’s symbols than to use their often-meager resources to try to carve out their own. For example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) co-opted the “what becomes a legend most” catch phrase of fur advertisers to turn it into “what disgraces a legend most” to push their “Fur Is Dead” campaign. Similarly, Adbusters created a take-off on Kool cigarettes to create an ad that showed a smoker as an “Utter FOOL.” A group called Infact, which changed its name to Corporate Accountability International in 2004, created a Marlboro man imitation whose face was half turned into a skeleton. The image helped propel their campaign to create a global anti-tobacco treaty, approved in 2003 as the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and ratified in 2005 by 40 countries.

4. *Gaining access to media outlets.* According to Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan, and Themba (1993), reporters need a compelling story to tell that has something newsworthy. Newsworthiness “pegs” or “news hooks” can include associating the issue with an anniversary, a season, or a milestone; localizing the story in some way; demonstrating irony, injustice, or a breakthrough of some sort; attaching a celebrity to the story; or creating controversy.

Media advocacy usually requires guerilla-style tactics. It requires more creativity to gain attention, make news, and mobilize public opinion without going negative. The trend toward negativity makes media advocacy a powerful but dangerous tool. The media advocate must bear in mind that once news has been created it can take on momentum in directions damaging to the sponsoring organization. The media advocate must be able to anticipate counterarguments from targeted organizations and be ready to handle a crisis situation should guerilla tactics go awry.

### MAKING THE MOST OF UNPLANNED OPPORTUNITIES

Even more traditional practitioners should be ready to jump on media advocacy opportunities that present themselves unexpectedly. The United Church of Christ (UCC), for example, had planned a fairly modest advertising campaign beginning in December 2004 to encourage people from all backgrounds to feel welcome in its church. A series of focus groups nationwide had established that many people felt alienated from churches, although the reasons varied widely. After months of “very typical” negotiations to purchase air time, according to Barb Powell, the church’s director of production, the broadcast television networks suddenly refused to air the ads on the eve of the campaign launch. The reason: One of the ads included homosexuals among those being “bounced” from a church and then welcomed into the UCC.

Within less than 2 days, the church had prepared for the media firestorm that followed by training spokespeople on the issues, producing fact sheets, and honing talking points. Bloggers, the first to cover the controversy, wrote about the story for 2 weeks, leading most major news outlets. Said Powell, “We could never have paid for that kind of PR and message dissemination. We didn’t expect or anticipate what happened” (Powell, personal communication, 2005).

The coverage led to increased attendance (attendance estimates from individual congregations ranged from +10% to +50%), heavy use of the church’s website (up almost 1,000% in December 2004), and a flood of donations that enabled the church to buy more advertising (including on cable channels and the conservative Fox News) than it originally would have been able to on the networks. Then, when *SpongeBob Squarepants* became a topic of controversy soon afterward for appearing in a video



FIG. 15.3. Seizing the unexpected media advocacy opportunity. The United Church of Christ welcomed SpongeBob Squarepants into its executive offices when the character received criticism from conservative religious groups for promoting tolerance in a PBS video. The news story dovetailed with the UCC's campaign to appeal to individuals who had felt alienated from church. Photo courtesy of the United Church of Christ.

promoting tolerance, the church seized the opportunity to keep its campaign in the news by releasing a statement that SpongeBob can feel welcome in the UCC, complete with photos of SpongeBob visiting church headquarters, shown in Figure 15.3. The church later purchased advertising space for its controversial “bouncer” ad on liberal, moderate, and conservative blogs, gaining even more exposure for the campaign.

The way the UCC transformed “a controversy not of our choosing” into “a gift” (United Church of Christ, 2005, p. 12) shows how strategic planning and informed flexibility can enable communication managers to deal with the unexpected. Strategists considering the media advocacy approach nevertheless must weigh its risks against the potential payoffs. According to Wallack et al. (1993), an advocacy campaign will probably make enemies because by drawing attention to a controversy “it points a finger, names names, and starts a fight” (p. 40). This means the communication manager must consider the likelihood of victory against the costliness of failure and must remember that, above all, an organization needs to maintain its credibility in any communication program. If a guerilla-style campaign costs an organization its credibility, even a short-term victory will not merit the cost. Advocacy campaigns still must operate in ways consistent with an organization’s long-term mission.

Communication managers also must be prepared to defend their organizations against media advocacy campaigns waged by other groups. Media advocates target institutions that have power in a community. If an organization becomes a target of an advocacy campaign, it must fight back with its own guerilla tactics or somehow demonstrate that the campaign has no merit. For example, American Forests found itself under attack for a promotion that used Dr. Seuss's environmentalist Lorax character, which cautions against cutting down Truffula trees. According to the Heritage Forests Campaign in Portland, which aims to preserve roadless wilderness areas, American Forests advocated clearcutting, which made its campaign disingenuous. Focusing on the contradiction between the Lorax character and the company's policies provided an easy way for the anti-clearcutting group to gain media attention on what would have been the 95th birthday of Theodore Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss. Deborah Gangloff of American Forests responded in Seuss-like language: "Shame on you. Shame. Shame. You think publicity by deceit is a feat!" and then provided evidence that the group's congressional testimony on the subject had been misinterpreted, that it is not an advocate of clearcutting, and that the organization often disagrees with timber companies (Hughes, 1999). In doing so, American Forests managed to turn the attack into positive publicity. The ability to launch a credible defense in such crisis situations depends on an organization's relationship with media personnel and past performance. A history of honesty, openness, and accessibility makes reporters more amenable to an organization's side of a story. As both the UCC and American Forests experiences show, good humor seems to help, too.

With this in mind, remember that even though media advocacy can make enemies, successful media advocacy nevertheless requires the cultivation of relationships. Key publics include gatekeepers such as reporters and bloggers, as well as potential collaborators or program co-sponsors. Wallack et al. (1993) wrote that the best media advocacy campaigns build a sense of community and of community-based power. Media advocacy campaigns aim to enact change at the community level instead of at the individual level. This, in turn, can help individuals in the community. By shaping the public agenda, shaping the way the agenda is debated, and advancing a policy-oriented solution, media advocacy can help improve the environment in which an organization and its key publics operate.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Communication research can contribute much to the professional's understanding of how people look for and make use of information. Decades of study have led to helpful generalizations about sources, messages, and communication channels that can help practitioners develop effective program strategies. The principles can help managers identify when a situation

calls for an accommodation- or social marketing-oriented strategy and when a situation calls for an advocacy-oriented or even guerilla-style strategy. Many of the generalizations presented in this chapter come intuitively to the seasoned communication professional, but one lesson may seem less obvious. The effectiveness of each tactic—characteristics of source, channel, and message—ultimately depends on how it will be perceived by intended and unintended audiences. This lesson, therefore, comprises the overarching rule of how communication works: *It depends*. No message, strategy, channel, or source has the same effect in every situation or for every person. This is why preliminary research and pretesting represent such vital parts of effective program planning.

# **IV**

## **THE SUCCESSFUL PITCH AND FOLLOW-THROUGH**

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# 16

## Presenting Campaigns, Program Proposals, and Research Reports

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### Chapter Contents

- Introductory Material
- Executive Summary
- Situation Analysis and Research Needs
- Research Goals
- Research Objectives
- Research Hypotheses
- Research Strategies
- Results (With Minimal Interpretation)
- Revised Situation Analysis
- Proposed Communication Plan
- Conclusion
- References and Appendixes
- The Successful Writer's Mind-Set
- Oral Presentations
- Final Thoughts

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Communication practitioners can expand their role in organizational decision making based on their important contributions to the organization's success, but they need to present their ideas effectively to do so. The communication manager's ideas achieve success only when they appear credible and successful to those who must approve project plans, budgets, and personnel decisions. Clients who cannot understand your research or who have not become convinced that your ideas will work will not hire you

for the job. Managers therefore need to treat the campaign plan or public relations program proposal as a kind of communication campaign. For those presenting research reports rather than complete plans, keep in mind that the client wants to understand the implications and limitations of the research you have done. Both situations require clear, confident, and forthright communication.

### **Communication Plans, Public Relations Proposals, and Research Reports**

Every agency and organization will have its own customs and expectations for oral and written presentations. Some like a lot of detail in written form, and some prefer brief proposals in an outline format. This chapter presents a generic, detailed format for a complete communication plan, shown in Table 16.1, so that practitioners have guidelines for the most formal campaign or program proposals. The format can be modified to fit a specific organization's needs. The parts include appropriate introductory material, an executive summary, a situation analysis and explanation of research needs, a list of research goals, a list of research objectives, a statement of research hypotheses, an explanation of research strategies, a description of the research results, a revised situation analysis that provides an explanation of the implications of the research findings, a proposed communication plan, a conclusion, and any relevant references and appendixes. The *research report* is similar to the communication plan or program proposal in that it includes everything up to the proposed communication plan. Instead of including a detailed plan, the research report includes the revised situation analysis or implications section and then segues straight to the conclusion.

#### **INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL**

Communication plans often will include a brief cover letter, sometimes called a *transmittal letter*. The cover letter for an internal document, such as a report submitted to a CEO by a department, can take the form of a memo. The cover letter states that the proposal requested is being submitted. The letter expresses appreciation to clients for the opportunity to work with them. It also makes it possible to highlight unique, surprising, or especially notable findings or recommendations that should interest the client. Finally, the cover letter invites the client to contact the agency with questions or concerns and provides contact names, phone numbers, fax numbers, and e-mail addresses as appropriate. It is constructed using the writing conventions of formal business style.

The plan includes customary introductory material, such as a title page that includes the client's name, the agency or department's name, the date, and a title identifying the purpose of the report. Giving the client's name more prominence than the agency on the title page conveys a more

**TABLE 16.1**  
Elements of the Campaign Plan, Program Proposal, or Research Report

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Title page (Include client's name, agency or department name, date, and report title)

Cover letter

Table of contents

List of tables and figures

I. Executive Summary

- Purpose of report or proposal
  - Overview of method and results
  - Overview of conclusions (recommendations) (about a sentence or two for each)
- length: 1 to 2 pages

II. Research needs

- Problem statement
  - Situation analysis
    - the issue (problem statement)
    - what was known about the client and the issue
      - history
      - reporting lines for budget and policies
      - internal and external opportunities and challenges
    - assumptions (things we thought we knew but had not verified)
    - information needs (questions)
- length: ranges considerably, often 4 to 8 pages

III. Research goals (What were you trying to find out?)

- Formal statements of research goals
- Further explanation of each goal, as needed length: usually 1 page or less

IV. Research objectives (How you found out, and by when)

- Formal statements of objectives
- length: usually 1 page or less

V. Research hypotheses (hunches or evidence-based expectations)

- Anticipated answers to questions
  - Reasoning for answer anticipated
- length: usually 1 to 2 pages

VI. Research strategies

- Explanation of methodology, sampling approach
    - reasons for choices based on time, budget expertise, and need for precision
    - advantages and limitations of each choice against alternatives
  - Operationalization of concepts (how ideas were measured)
    - wording of questions
    - relevance of questions to hypotheses
  - Procedures for data analysis
- length: usually 2 to 4 pages

VII. Results

- Discussed as answers to research questions or hypotheses
  - Includes tests of assumptions
  - Includes surprises
  - Includes explanatory tables and figures as necessary
  - Can integrate findings from different methods or discuss sequentially
- length: usually several pages, plus illustrative material

VIII. Implications of the results (revised situation analysis)

- Overview of strategic recommendations with supporting evidence
- Identification of (*Only for campaign or program proposals; not included in research reports*)

(Continued)

TABLE 16.1 (Continued)

- 
- target publics
  - media/communication vehicles
  - messages/themes
  - evaluation strategies
    - length varies: parts may be in outline form with annotations for supporting evidence
- IX. Proposed communication plan (*only for campaign or program proposals; not included in research reports*)
- Goals
  - Objectives
  - Strategies
  - Tactics
  - Calendar (time line)
  - Budget
    - length varies; may be in outline form
- X. Conclusion
- Summary of
    - original situation analysis and problem statement
    - revised situation analysis
    - recommended strategy
    - anticipated results
    - implications for a longer-term view
- XI. References (as needed)
- XII. Appendixes
- Research instruments
  - Raw results
  - Sample campaign materials (*only for campaign or program proposals; not included in research reports*)
  - Other relevant background materials
- 

service-oriented impression, consistent with social marketing's focus on the target audience. Emphasizing the agency or department producing the report can seem arrogant. Clients gain a first impression of the strategic planning team based on these details.

The introductory material also includes a detailed table of contents, along with separate lists of tables and figures so that clients can find material of special interest quickly. The team lists items included in appendixes individually so that the readers know what they will find there and in what order. Appendixes, however, often do not have page numbers. Instead, each piece receives a different heading, or slip-sheet divider, noting whether it is Appendix A, Appendix B, or Appendix C along with a title that identifies the content more specifically, such as "community survey questionnaire." Some stylistic guidelines call for the table of contents and illustrative material to appear before the executive summary, whereas others call for them to appear after the executive summary.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The executive summary addresses the needs of busy clients and executives who want to learn critical information at a glance. They may never have

the motivation or opportunity to read a report all the way through. Indeed, committees evaluating a series of proposals may look first for reasons to weed out proposals as inappropriate, unresponsive, or impractical. As a result, managers must make a strong case for a credible proposal in just a few words.

The executive summary therefore usually acts as a special form of abstract. The executive summary serves as the business parallel to scientific papers that often have abstracts of 75 to 125 words to synopsise complicated procedures and findings. Companies have different customs for executive summaries; some organizations use the executive summary more as an overview chapter than as a true abstract. Such executive summaries can go on for 10 to 25 pages. Once an executive summary goes beyond 2 pages, however, it is considered a summary chapter and not an abstract. Obviously, nobody can read it at a glance. In this case, an additional 1- or 2-page abstract may be helpful.

The purpose of the executive summary is to present the purpose of the report or proposal, the procedures used to evaluate and address the needs presented by the situation, the findings of the research performed, the conclusions drawn from the research, and an overview of specific recommendations for action. A concise executive summary outlines every crucial section of the report or proposal, giving one or two sentences to each section. Some especially helpful summaries include page numbers directing readers to the sections of the proposal that contain the details.

## SITUATION ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH NEEDS

The situation analysis demonstrates the agency's understanding of the issue and situation under consideration. In some cases, this section presents research findings, but in other cases, this section provides an overview of how a situation appeared before research was performed. If an agency has performed research, this provides an opportunity to highlight the purpose of the research so that clients can understand why it was necessary.

The section opens with a statement of the problem, just like the lead to a news story. It then summarizes everything known about the client and the issue. This includes the client's mission, history, personnel and decision-making structure, locations, facilities, and other projects. It also includes a history of the issue itself, such as whether it is an international problem of concern to many organizations or a problem only for the client. The description of the issue describes the extent to which the issue is emerging, declining, stable, or cyclical. As explained in chapter 2, the situation analysis provides a detailed explanation of the opportunities and challenges that exist within the organization and its environment. It also identifies what additional information is required to design a successful campaign. Agencies and organizations often have their own preferred format for presenting this information, such as using the SWOC/SWOT (strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities, challenges, or threats) analysis. Whether presented in narrative, outline, or tabular form, background on the situation is an essential element for campaign planning. This section usually ranges from about 4 to 8 pages.

### **RESEARCH GOALS**

The campaign proposal then turns to the presentation of research goals. If it is a proposal to perform research preparatory to the development of a campaign, this section must explain the purpose of the research. If preparing the reader for the results of completed research, it can be written in the past tense. Although this section presents research goals in a formal style, the purpose of the goal statements is to explain what the agency or department was (or will be) trying to find out. Some explanation of the goals can be provided, but this section usually requires only 1 page or less, most often in an outline form.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The research objectives are presented in formal objective style in an outline. These objectives state what research was (or will be) performed in response to the research goals. The goals and objectives can be presented in one interwoven section instead of two separate sections if doing so makes the purpose of the research more clear. This section usually requires only 1 page.

### **RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

Although communication managers do not need to act like academic scientists, they still can present informed hunches to clients. These hunches guide both data collection and data analysis. In response to the questions that need answers (the research goals), this section provides insight into what answers the manager may expect to find, along with the reasons for these expectations. If a manager expects to present surprising or discomfiting results to the client, this section can help prepare the client by presenting possible results scenarios. This section usually requires 1 or 2 pages.

### **RESEARCH STRATEGIES**

All research requires a thorough explanation of the methods used to collect data. For quantitative research, refer to the Standards for Minimal Disclosure of Opinion Polls (American Association for Opinion Research, 2004) (see Sidebar 12.1); further details are available in Appendixes A and B. Because every research project suffers from limitations of some sort, the

client needs to understand what guided your decision making as you performed the research. For example, if you present a mail survey, the client may want to know why a telephone or Internet survey would not have been a better choice. If you surveyed residents of one town when the client operates in seven towns, the client will wonder why only one town was used.

This section discusses the specifics of methodology, along with the reasons for making choices of method, sample, question design, and procedure. Steps made to ensure quality control throughout data collection also are included. The wording of all questions used in surveys, focus groups, and formal interviews are described, although long data-collection instruments can be described briefly using examples, and complete details can be provided in the appendixes. This section also includes a discussion of the limitations of the research performed, as well as a defense of its usefulness given its limitations. For example, a telephone survey of individuals who have declined to donate to an organization during previous fund-raising campaigns could ask what might prevent a respondent from donating to an organization like the client's, instead of asking what has prevented the respondent from giving in the past. The disadvantage of such a strategy is that the question is less direct, but the advantage is that respondents may give a more honest, less defensive answer if they do not feel singled out for having refused to donate previously. This section includes information about response rates, refusal rates, and data analysis procedures, explained in chapter 12. This usually requires about 2 to 4 pages, depending on the scope of the project.

### **RESULTS (WITH MINIMAL INTERPRETATION)**

This section presents a straightforward recitation of the research findings, putting each finding into the context of the research goals and hypotheses. It helps to restate each research goal and hypothesis before providing the results. This allows a client to read the results section independent of the rest of the document. Providing context ensures that the results will make sense to the reader; managers should never simply list results. Consider that the client will read this section to find out what questions have answers, what assumptions have support, and what surprises have emerged. Research for a client with an apparent credibility problem, for example, may reveal that the client suffers from a lack of awareness rather than a lack of trust.

It helps to provide tables and figures to highlight particularly important findings. Too many tables and figures, however, overwhelm the reader and reduce their impact. A judicious selection of tables and figures is integrated into the text instead of being relegated to the appendixes because most clients do not have the time, motivation, or inclination to flip back and

forth between the two sections. The length of this section depends on the scope of the research and the complexity of the findings.

When reporting several research projects, such as a survey and a series of focus groups, the manager must decide whether the information will have the greatest effect presented as discrete sections (e.g., Survey, Focus Group 1, Focus Group 2, Focus Group 3) or in a consolidated discussion format organized in terms of research questions and hypotheses. Often, the consolidated format works well. For example, a survey finding on low credibility can be supplemented by focus group responses, which should take the form of themes illustrated by specific quotes, describing impressions of the client's recent communication activities.

### **REVISED SITUATION ANALYSIS**

This section discusses the implications of the research results. After the research has been performed, the communication manager will have a more definite view of the reasons for a problem experienced by the client, along with directions to guide strategy development. This section summarizes the results, indicating how they change or confirm the original view of the situation. The section goes on to provide an overview of recommendations for a public relations program or communication campaign. Each recommendation must seem appropriate and realistic. To convince the client, each recommendation is accompanied by reasons that describe why it is appropriate; why it will be effective; and why it is worth the cost, in time and money, of implementation. Supporting evidence can take the form of findings from the research, public relations principles, and communication theory. Clients expect concrete reasons for action rather than esoteric discussions of theory, however, so keep it simple.

Coming after the summary of the situation and recommendations, this section presents a clear breakdown of the elements for the communication program. These include a discussion of appropriate target publics, communication channels, recommended messages and themes, and methods to evaluate program success. This section can be presented in outline form, provided each recommendation is explained and defended in a companion section. The length varies depending on the scope of the campaign.

### **PROPOSED COMMUNICATION PLAN**

This section, frequently presented in outline format, presents the complete communication program plan. This includes goals, objectives, strategies, tactics, a calendar for implementation and completion, and a proposed budget. Some managers prefer to present all of the goals, followed by the objectives, followed by strategies and tactics. Others integrate all of the

components needed to achieve each goal with that particular goal, like a series of strategic planning ladders (see chapter 3) presenting strategies and tactics specific to each objective along with the objective itself.

## CONCLUSION

A brief conclusion provides a summary of the problem, the discoveries, and the solutions. The conclusion can put the project into a larger context, showing how achieving the goals of this program will contribute to the organization's overall mission. A long-term view will demonstrate that the communication manager has a deep understanding of the client's needs and challenges, which can help build credibility both for the project proposed and for the long term. The conclusion should remain brief, rarely stretching beyond 1 or 2 pages.

## REFERENCES AND APPENDIXES

Some communication plans include references, but managers must determine the extent to which clients will appreciate background material as opposed to finding it distracting or, even worse, self-important. Appendixes, however, usually are essential. The appendixes include copies of all research instruments used, a summary of the raw results, and other illustrative sample campaign materials such as brochures.

## THE SUCCESSFUL WRITER'S MIND-SET

One of the most important skills a manager can possess is the cultivation of a confident demeanor, both on paper and in person. Managers sell themselves short by appearing hesitant, because hesitance will appear to come from self-doubt. Confidence comes across well when combined with a respectful attitude, but managers must avoid seeming arrogant. In writing, hesitance reveals itself through use of the first person to advance ideas. Using phrases such as "I believe" and "we recommend" signals to the reader that managers do not have evidence on which to base opinions. As a result, written reports and proposals need to avoid using "I" and "we," which appear to advance tentative opinions instead of authoritative facts. A better strategy has the writer using the third person to state ideas directly and plainly, remembering to back up every idea with evidence, such as public relations principles and theory, and data from research, a source, or experts. Assertions have much more credibility when the manager can demonstrate their veracity with facts and sources, instead of "believing" or "feeling" them to be true.

Reports and proposals also must avoid passive voice, which gives the appearance of hesitance or, worse, evasiveness. Passive voice makes it seem as if an action is being done to another thing by something, instead of something doing an action to another thing. In other words, it reflects reactive writing instead of proactive writing because it emphasizes the receiver of the action instead of the initiator. Active voice and active verbs give power to communication efforts. Active voice appears authoritative.

Throughout the document, the manager must display confidence, expertise, and empathy with the client. To communicate effectively, writing must be clear, interesting, and correct. As shown in *The Effective Writer's Mind Set* (Austin, 1989) the writer must ask the following questions:

1. *What do I want to get across?* Know your main communication objective. The opening argument or lead forms the foundation for a communication piece. A strong lead helps the rest of a piece fall into place and shows readers why they should continue to read. A good lead uses direct sentence construction and addresses who, what, where, when, how, and why. A main argument for a report or speech shows a commitment to the subject through a clear, strong position statement. A strong opening argument statement will inspire and focus your writing and will inspire the reader as well.

2. *Can I visualize my audience?* Writing must target an audience. Try to imagine the audience and its expectations. Show an awareness of its interests and level of expertise. Show respect for audience members: Assume they are intelligent. But do not assume they know what you are talking about: Spell everything out using simple language. Tell them only what they care to know. If you want them to know something, make sure you show them why they should want to know it (i.e., demonstrate its relevance to them).

3. *Is my main point obvious?* Get to the point quickly. You do not have room or time to get wordy. Busy readers will not bother to wade through extra verbiage. Use active voice (not passive voice that relies on words such as "is," "was," and "to be"), look out for lots of little words such as "then," "in," "to," "so," "as," and so on because they often signal clutter, and worry more about providing supporting statements for your arguments than about adding embellishments and description.

4. *Am I vague?* Get specific. Without sufficient support, even the best ideas remain generalizations. At worst, the reader will think the communicator is trying to hide something. Try to develop main ideas to their fullest extent; explore the areas of a subject in relevant detail. Do not just tell; instead, show, by using evidence and examples. Remember that you need to convince the reader with your argument, so avoid merely describing your position.

5. *Am I logical?* Make strong transitions. Written ideas need to progress in a continuous, logical manner. Readers must see easily how every new bit of information relates to what came before it. Do not assume any relationships are obvious; you have to make these connections obvious for the reader as you write. Present new news before old news.

6. *Do I provide enough (too much) explanation?* Use supporting evidence effectively. Use only what you need: the perfect example, the exemplary quotation, the clinching statistic. When using quotes, remember to introduce the quote and explain its significance or implications (i.e., what it shows or proves). Do not just drop it in. Readers need to know why you want them to read a quote.

7. *Am I interesting?* Vary sentence structure. Variety comes naturally in our thoughts and spoken words, thus variety in your writing will read more naturally and will seem more interesting. How do you do it? Vary short and long sentences. Try mixing the order of subordinate clauses or subject and verb. Read your writing aloud to hear how it sounds. But avoid a lot of complexity, particularly in news items that generally have few embellishments.

8. *Does my writing read naturally?* Write as you would speak, but avoid conversational expressions. Good writing read aloud sounds like good conversation. In conversation, however, we use shortcuts and embellishments that appear sloppy in print. Avoid meaningless qualifiers such as “really,” “very,” “pretty,” “so,” “sort of,” and “kind of.” Also avoid colloquialisms and clichés. If you have original thoughts, they deserve original words to describe them. Make sure you follow the appropriate style guidelines for your piece: Associated Press style for news releases, newsletters, and newspapers; Chicago style for magazine articles; American Psychological Association style for scientific documents, and so on.

9. *Is my writing free of errors?* Eliminate mechanical and grammatical errors. Always proofread. No matter how good your ideas, no one will take them seriously if your writing includes basic errors. If in doubt of spelling or grammar, look it up or ask a colleague. Always proofread at least once just for grammar and spelling errors.

10. *What impression do I leave at the end?* Write a strong conclusion. In report, feature, proposal, and speech writing, your conclusion makes as strong an impact as your introduction. Here you sum up your evidence and show how it all inevitably validates your main argument. This also provides you with the opportunity to take the reader to the next step. You can expand on the topic, suggest where all this may lead, or show how it all contributes to an overarching mission.

11. *Am I my worst critic?* Revise and rewrite. Become your toughest critic. Do not fear multiple rewrites. Good writing appears deceptively easy, just like good gymnastics. It takes a lot of practice and wrong moves to get it right. Do not be discouraged!

## ORAL PRESENTATIONS

Presentations themselves require research. Presentations differ depending on the size of the room and the number of people attending a presentation, for example. It helps to know as much about the audience as possible to understand their interests, their needs, and their expectations of formality. It also helps to know their competition and your own competition to put recommendations into a context that will maximize the presenters' credibility. Familiarity with room lighting and seating arrangements helps presenters construct a presentation with the appropriate degree of formality or intimacy.

Always be ready to adapt because timing, room locations, and other characteristics of the presentation situation may change on a moment's notice. If you plan to use PowerPoint or other technology, have backup plans in case equipment breaks or the power goes out. In one case, presenters to a regional public relations breakfast meeting brought two computers, each with the presentation on the hard drive, as well as a CD-ROM in case someone else's equipment had to be used. When the interfaces to the projector worked with none of the equipment, including a third computer supplied by the event planners, no technicians were on duty yet to help out. Fortunately, the presenters had brought overhead transparencies and handouts.

Oral presentations often take the form of a 10- to 15-minute pitch, after which clients ask questions. The sale of a project ultimately depends on the quality of its presentation, including the ability of the presenters to deal with unexpected situations and challenging questions. Effective presentations require substance more than bells and whistles, but some sizzle helps demonstrate professionalism and creativity. A successful pitch depends on effective organization, clarity, and completeness; clear illustration of key points; and a professional demeanor.

1. *Organization of ideas.* As with a written document, clients appreciate it if managers present ideas in a logical order. Clients who become confused will blame the communicator rather than themselves. They will look for another agency that makes more sense. In other words, if the presentation loses the client, the agency loses the job.

2. *Clarity and completeness of presentation.* Ideas need to seem concrete, efficient, and effective. They must build on each other to create a cohesive plan, without redundancy. A brief presentation can never present every detail of a proposal; careful choices must be made. The client needs to know he or she has heard the key ideas, recommendations, and evidence. The manager's challenge is to demonstrate a deep understanding of the client that enables the agency or department to anticipate the client's priorities, concerns, and reservations about the project. The client should not have any nagging questions or doubts following the presentation. It helps to practice

answering tough questions to anticipate dealing with reservations a client may have.

3. *Illustration of key points.* Presenters need visual aids to illustrate key points and to add interest to a presentation. Illustrations also can help relieve the presenter's nerves by providing clients with a focus other than the presenter. Illustrations such as outlines of key points can pull a presentation back on track if a presenter forgets the script or becomes distracted by questions or disturbances. Visual aids must serve an explanatory purpose, instead of seeming pointless. Pointless illustrations risk leading clients to believe agencies will recommend pointless program tactics as well. Because illustrations represent the presenters in a prominent way, they must be neat and free of errors. Charts and tables require large type and few words to be readable and easy to interpret. Give the audience at least 3 to 5 seconds to digest even the simplest visual aid. Clients often expect computer-aided presentations, but they aid a presentation only if they make sense. Keep in mind that equipment frequently malfunctions, and have a "low-tech" backup plan for any "high tech" presentation.

4. *Presentation style.* Presenters need to look and act professional, which requires rehearsal. Most clients expect presenters to dress in business attire, but some agencies have success with a more avant garde approach that distinguishes them from the norm. This is a risky strategy, however, and can communicate sloppiness or arrogance if it backfires. To demonstrate confidence and empathy, presenters need to make eye contact with audience members. The presentation of bad news requires a gentle demeanor, and in some situations eye contact can seem overly aggressive: Avoid making clients feel defensive. To soften bad news, open with a bit of good news and then present bad news without assigning blame and in a way that gives the client realistic hope that problems can be resolved. Presenters need to show enthusiasm for and confidence in their material. If something goes wrong during the presentation, the client probably will not worry about it if the presenters show good humor and continued confidence in their material.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The communication plan serves as the manager's sales pitch. The manager demonstrating expertise at promoting an organization's mission must illustrate this expertise in the promotion of the communication department or agency itself. Each public relations pitch constitutes a communication campaign in miniature. The manager wants to appear confident, credible, enthusiastic, and creative, but never hesitant, insincere, uninterested, or arrogant. Public relations and communication principles apply just as much to plan writing and presentation as to programming itself.

# Appendix A

## Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations

### Public Relations Society of America

#### LETTER FROM THE PRSA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

It is with enormous professional pleasure and personal pride that we, the Public Relations Society of America Board of Directors, put before you a new Public Relations Member Code of Ethics for our Society. It is the result of two years of concentrated effort led by the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards. Comments of literally hundreds and hundreds of members were considered. There were focus groups at our 1999 national meeting in Anaheim, California. We sought and received intensive advice and counsel from the Ethics Resource Center, our outside consultants on the project. Additional recommendations were received from your Board of Directors, PRSA staff, outside reviewers, as well as District and Section officers. Extensive research involving analysis of numerous codes of conduct, ethics statements, and standards and practices approaches was also carried out.

In fact, this Member Code of Ethics has been developed to serve as a foundation for discussion of an emerging global Code of Ethics and Conduct for the practice of Public Relations.

This approach is dramatically different from that which we have relied upon in the past. You'll find it different in three powerfully important ways:

1. Emphasis on enforcement of the Code has been eliminated. But, the PRSA Board of Directors retains the right to bar from membership or expel from the Society any individual who has been or is sanctioned

by a government agency or convicted in a court of law of an action that is in violation of this Code.

2. The new focus is on universal values that inspire ethical behavior and performance.
3. Desired behavior is clearly illustrated by providing language, experience, and examples to help the individual practitioner better achieve important ethical and principled business objectives. This approach should help everyone better understand what the expected standards of conduct truly are.

Perhaps most important of all, the mission of the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards has now been substantially altered to focus primarily on education and training, on collaboration with similar efforts in other major professional societies, and to serve an advisory role to the Board on ethical matters of major importance.

The foundation of our value to our companies, clients, and those we serve is their ability to rely on our ethical and morally acceptable behavior. Please review this new Member Code of Ethics in this context:

- Its Values are designed to inspire and motivate each of us every day to the highest levels of ethical practice.
- Its Code Provisions are designed to help each of us clearly understand the limits and specific performance required to be an ethical practitioner.
- Its Commitment mechanism is designed to ensure that every Society member understands fully the obligations of membership and the expectation of ethical behavior that are an integral part of membership in the PRSA.

This approach is stronger than anything we have ever had because:

- It will have a daily impact on the practice of Public Relations.
- There are far fewer gray areas and issues that require interpretation.
- It will grow stronger and be more successful than what we have had in the past through education, through training, and through analysis of behaviors.

The strength of the Code will grow because of the addition of precedent and the ethical experiences of other major professional organizations around the world.

Our new Code elevates our ethics, our values, and our commitment to the level they belong, at the very top of our daily practice of Public Relations.

**PRSA Board of Directors**

## A MESSAGE FROM THE PRSA BOARD OF ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

### Our Primary Obligation

The primary obligation of membership in the Public Relations Society of America is the ethical practice of Public Relations.

The PRSA Member Code of Ethics is the way each member of our Society can daily reaffirm a commitment to ethical professional activities and decisions.

- The Code sets forth the principles and standards that guide our decisions and actions.
- The Code solidly connects our values and our ideals to the work each of us does every day.
- The Code is about what we should do, and why we should do it.

The Code is also meant to be a living, growing body of knowledge, precedent, and experience. It should stimulate our thinking and encourage us to seek guidance and clarification when we have questions about principles, practices, and standards of conduct.

Every member's involvement in preserving and enhancing ethical standards is essential to building and maintaining the respect and credibility of our profession. Using our values, principles, standards of conduct, and commitment as a foundation, and continuing to work together on ethical issues, we ensure that the Public Relations Society of America fulfills its obligation to build and maintain the framework for public dialogue that deserves the public's trust and support.

### The Members of the 2000 Board of Ethics and Professional Standards

Robert D. Frause, APR, Fellow PRSA Chairman BEPS Seattle, Washington	Kathy R. Fitzpatrick, APR Gainesville, Florida	Linda Welter Cohen, APR Tucson, Arizona
James R. Frankowiak, APR Tampa, Florida	James E. Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA White Plains, New York	Roger D. Buehrer, APR Fellow PRSA Las Vegas, Nevada
Jeffrey P. Julin, APR Denver, Colorado	David M. Bicofsky, APR, Fellow PRSA Teaneck, New Jersey	James W. Wyckoff, APR New York, New York

## PREAMBLE

### **Public Relations Society of America Member Code of Ethics 2000**

- Professional Values
- Principles of Conduct
- Commitment and Compliance

This Code applies to PRSA members. The Code is designed to be a useful guide for PRSA members as they carry out their ethical responsibilities. This document is designed to anticipate and accommodate, by precedent, ethical challenges that may arise. The scenarios outlined in the Code provision are actual examples of misconduct. More will be added as experience with the Code occurs.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is committed to ethical practices. The level of public trust PRSA members seek, as we serve the public good, means we have taken on a special obligation to operate ethically.

The value of member reputation depends upon the ethical conduct of everyone affiliated with the Public Relations Society of America. Each of us sets an example for each other - as well as other professionals—by our pursuit of excellence with powerful standards of performance, professionalism, and ethical conduct.

Emphasis on enforcement of the Code has been eliminated. But, the PRSA Board of Directors retains the right to bar from membership or expel from the Society any individual who has been or is sanctioned by a government agency or convicted in a court of law of an action that is in violation of this Code.

Ethical practice is the most important obligation of a PRSA member. We view the Member Code of Ethics as a model for other professions, organizations, and professionals.

### **PRSA MEMBER STATEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL VALUES**

This statement presents the core values of PRSA members and, more broadly, of the public relations profession. These values provide the foundation for the Member Code of Ethics and set the industry standard for the professional practice of public relations. These values are the fundamental beliefs that guide our behaviors and decision-making process. We believe our professional values are vital to the integrity of the profession as a whole.

## ADVOCACY

- We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent.
- We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate.

## HONESTY

- We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.

## EXPERTISE

- We acquire and responsibly use specialized knowledge and experience.
- We advance the profession through continued professional development, research, and education.
- We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

## INDEPENDENCE

- We provide objective counsel to those we represent.
- We are accountable for our actions.

## LOYALTY

- We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest.

## FAIRNESS

- We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public.
- We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

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**PRSA CODE PROVISIONS****Free Flow of Information***Core Principle*

Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society.

*Intent*

- To maintain the integrity of relationships with the media, government officials, and the public.
- To aid informed decision making.

*Guidelines*

A member shall:

- Preserve the integrity of the process of communication.
- Be honest and accurate in all communications.
- Act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which the practitioner is responsible.
- Preserve the free flow of unprejudiced information when giving or receiving gifts by ensuring that gifts are nominal, legal, and infrequent.

*Examples of Improper Conduct Under This Provision:*

- A member representing a ski manufacturer gives a pair of expensive racing skis to a sports magazine columnist, to influence the columnist to write favorable articles about the product.
- A member entertains a government official beyond legal limits and/or in violation of government reporting requirements.

**Competition***Core Principle*

Promoting healthy and fair competition among professionals preserves an ethical climate while fostering a robust business environment.

*Intent*

- To promote respect and fair competition among public relations professionals.

- To serve the public interest by providing the widest choice of practitioner options.

### *Guidelines*

A member shall:

- Follow ethical hiring practices designed to respect free and open competition without deliberately undermining a competitor.
- Preserve intellectual property rights in the marketplace.

### *Examples of Improper Conduct Under This Provision:*

- A member employed by a “client organization” shares helpful information with a counseling firm that is competing with others for the organization’s business.
- A member spreads malicious and unfounded rumors about a competitor in order to alienate the competitor’s clients and employees in a ploy to recruit people and business.

## **Disclosure of Information**

### *Core Principle*

Open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society.

### *Intent*

- To build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making.

### *Guidelines*

A member shall:

- Be honest and accurate in all communications.
- Act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which the member is responsible.
- Investigate the truthfulness and accuracy of information released on behalf of those represented.
- Reveal the sponsors for causes and interests represented.
- Disclose financial interest (such as stock ownership) in a client’s organization.
- Avoid deceptive practices.

***Examples of Improper Conduct Under This Provision:***

- Front groups: A member implements “grass roots” campaigns or letter-writing campaigns to legislators on behalf of undisclosed interest groups.
- Lying by omission: A practitioner for a corporation knowingly fails to release financial information, giving a misleading impression of the corporation’s performance.
- A member discovers inaccurate information disseminated via a Web site or media kit and does not correct the information.
- A member deceives the public by employing people to pose as volunteers to speak at public hearings and participate in “grass roots” campaigns.

**SAFEGUARDING CONFIDENCES*****Core Principle***

Client trust requires appropriate protection of confidential and private information.

***Intent***

- To protect the privacy rights of clients, organizations, and individuals by safeguarding confidential information.

***Guidelines***

A member shall:

- Safeguard the confidences and privacy rights of present, former, and prospective clients and employees.
- Protect privileged, confidential, or insider information gained from a client or organization.
- Immediately advise an appropriate authority if a member discovers that confidential information is being divulged by an employee of a client company or organization.

***Examples of Improper Conduct Under This Provision:***

- A member changes jobs, takes confidential information, and uses that information in the new position to the detriment of the former employer.
- A member intentionally leaks proprietary information to the detriment of some other party.

## Conflicts of Interest

### *Core Principle*

Avoiding real, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers, and the public.

### *Intent*

- To earn trust and mutual respect with clients or employers.
- To build trust with the public by avoiding or ending situations that put one's personal or professional interests in conflict with society's interests.

### *Guidelines*

A member shall:

- Act in the best interests of the client or employer, even subordinating the member's personal interests.
- Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests.
- Disclose promptly any existing or potential conflict of interest to affected clients or organizations.
- Encourage clients and customers to determine if a conflict exists after notifying all affected parties.

### *Examples of Improper Conduct Under This Provision*

- The member fails to disclose that he or she has a strong financial interest in a client's chief competitor.
- The member represents a "competitor company" or a "conflicting interest" without informing a prospective client.

## Enhancing the Profession

### *Core Principle*

Public relations professionals work constantly to strengthen the public's trust in the profession.

### *Intent*

- To build respect and credibility with the public for the profession of public relations.
- To improve, adapt, and expand professional practices.

### *Guidelines*

A member shall:

- Acknowledge that there is an obligation to protect and enhance the profession.
- Keep informed and educated about practices in the profession to ensure ethical conduct.
- Actively pursue personal professional development.
- Decline representation of clients or organizations that urge or require actions contrary to this Code.
- Accurately define what public relations activities can accomplish.
- Counsel subordinates in proper ethical decision making.
- Require that subordinates adhere to the ethical requirements of the Code.
- Report ethical violations, whether committed by PRSA members or not, to the appropriate authority.

### *Examples of Improper Conduct Under This Provision:*

- A PRSA member declares publicly that a product the client sells is safe, without disclosing evidence to the contrary.
- A member initially assigns some questionable client work to a non-member practitioner to avoid the ethical obligation of PRSA membership.

## **Resources**

### *Rules and Guidelines*

The following PRSA documents, available in *The Blue Book*, provide detailed rules and guidelines to help guide your professional behavior:

- PRSA Bylaws
- PRSA Administrative Rules
- Member Code of Ethics

If, after reviewing them, you still have a question or issue, contact PRSA headquarters as noted below.

### **Questions**

The PRSA is here to help. Whether you have a serious concern or simply need clarification, contact Judy Voss at [judy.voss@prsa.org](mailto:judy.voss@prsa.org).

Approved by the PRSA Assembly, 2000.  
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# Appendix B

## Code of Professional Ethics and Practices

We, the members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, subscribe to the principles expressed in the following code. Our goals are to support sound and ethical practice in the conduct of public opinion research and in the use of such research for policy- and decision-making in the public and private sectors, as well as to improve public understanding of public opinion and survey research methods and the proper use of public opinion and survey research results.

We pledge ourselves to maintain high standards of scientific competence and integrity in conducting, analyzing, and reporting our work; in our relations with survey respondents; with our clients; with those who eventually use the research for decision-making purposes; and with the general public. We further pledge ourselves to reject all tasks or assignments that would require activities inconsistent with the principles of this Code.

### THE CODE

#### I. Principles of Professional Practice in the Conduct of Our Work

A. We shall exercise due care in developing research designs and survey instruments, and in collecting, processing, and analyzing data, taking all reasonable steps to assure the reliability and validity of results.

1. We shall recommend and employ only those tools and methods of analysis that, in our professional judgment, are well suited to the research problem at hand.
2. We shall not knowingly select research tools and methods of analysis that yield misleading conclusions.

3. We shall not knowingly make interpretations of research results that are inconsistent with the data available, nor shall we tacitly permit such interpretations.
4. We shall not knowingly imply that interpretations should be accorded greater confidence than the data actually warrant.

B. We shall describe our methods and findings accurately and in appropriate detail in all research reports, adhering to the standards for minimal disclosure specified in Section III.

C. If any of our work becomes the subject of a formal investigation of an alleged violation of this Code, undertaken with the approval of the AAPOR Executive Council, we shall provide additional information on the survey in such detail that a fellow survey practitioner would be able to conduct a professional evaluation of the survey.

## II. Principles of Professional Responsibility in Our Dealings With People

### A. The Public:

1. When preparing a report for public release we shall ensure that the findings are a balanced and accurate portrayal of the survey results.
2. If we become aware of the appearance in public of serious inaccuracies or distortions regarding our research, we shall publicly disclose what is required to correct these inaccuracies or distortions, including, as appropriate, a statement to the public media, legislative body, regulatory agency, or other appropriate group, to which the inaccuracies or distortions were presented.
3. We shall inform those for whom we conduct publicly released surveys that AAPOR standards require members to release minimal information about such surveys, and we shall make all reasonable efforts to encourage clients to subscribe to our standards for minimal disclosure in their releases.

### B. Clients or Sponsors:

1. When undertaking work for a private client, we shall hold confidential all proprietary information obtained about the client and about the conduct and findings of the research undertaken for the client, except when the dissemination of the information is expressly authorized by the client, or when disclosure becomes necessary under the terms of Section I-C or II-A of this Code.

2. We shall be mindful of the limitations of our techniques and capabilities and shall accept only those research assignments that we can reasonably expect to accomplish within these limitations.

#### C. The Profession:

1. We recognize our responsibility to the science of survey research to disseminate as freely as possible the ideas and findings that emerge from our research.
2. We shall not cite our membership in the Association as evidence of professional competence, since the Association does not so certify any persons or organizations.

#### D. The Respondent:

1. We shall avoid practices or methods that may harm, humiliate, or seriously mislead survey respondents.
2. We shall respect respondents' concerns about their privacy.
3. Aside from the decennial census and a few other surveys, participation in surveys is voluntary. We shall provide all persons selected for inclusion with a description of the survey sufficient to permit them to make an informed and free decision about their participation.
4. We shall not misrepresent our research or conduct other activities (such as sales, fund raising, or political campaigning) under the guise of conducting research.
5. Unless the respondent waives confidentiality for specified uses, we shall hold as privileged and confidential all information that might identify a respondent with his or her responses. We also shall not disclose or use the names of respondents for non-research purposes unless the respondents grant us permission to do so.
6. We understand that the use of our survey results in a legal proceeding does not relieve us of our ethical obligation to keep confidential all respondent identifiable information or lessen the importance of respondent anonymity.

### III. Standards for Minimal Disclosure

Good professional practice imposes the obligation upon all public opinion researchers to include, in any report of research results, or to make available when that report is released, certain essential

information about how the research was conducted. At a minimum, the following items should be disclosed.

1. Who sponsored the survey, and who conducted it.
2. The exact wording of questions asked, including the text of any preceding instruction or explanation to the interviewer or respondents that might reasonably be expected to affect the response.
3. A definition of the population under study, and a description of the sampling frame used to identify this population.
4. A description of the sample design, giving a clear indication of the method by which the respondents were selected by the researcher, or whether the respondents were entirely self-selected.
5. Sample sizes and, where appropriate, eligibility criteria, screening procedures, and response rates computed according to AAPOR Standard Definitions. At a minimum, a summary of disposition of sample cases should be provided so that response rates could be computed.
6. A discussion of the precision of the findings, including estimates of sampling error, and a description of any weighting or estimating procedures used.
7. Which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than on the total sample, and the size of such parts.
8. Method, location, and dates of data collection.

From time to time, AAPOR Council may issue guidelines and recommendations on best practices with regard to the release, design and conduct of surveys.

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*As revised in 2005.*

# Appendix C

## Guidelines and Standards for Measuring and Evaluating PR Effectiveness

### The Institute for Public Relations Research and Evaluation

#### GETTING SPECIFIC: STANDARDS FOR MEASURING PR OUTPUTS

There are many possible tools and techniques that PR practitioners can utilize to begin to measure PR *outputs*, but there are the four that are most frequently relied on to measure PR impact at the *output* level: Media Content Analysis, Cyberspace Analysis, Trade Show and Event Measurement, and Public Opinion Polls.

#### I. Media Content Analysis

This is the process of studying and tracking what has been written and broadcast, translating this qualitative material into quantitative form through some type of counting approach that involves coding and classifying of specific messages.

Some researchers and PR practitioners in the U.S. refer to this as “Media Measurement” and/or “Publicity Tracking” research. In the United Kingdom, the technique is often referred to as “Media Evaluation;” and in Germany as “Media Resonance.” Whatever the terminology used to describe this particular technique, more often than not its prime function is to determine whether the key messages, concepts, and themes that an organization might be interested in disseminating to others via the media do, indeed, receive some measure of exposure as a result of a particular public relations effort or activity.

The coding, classifying, and analysis that is done can be relatively limited or far-reaching, depending on the needs and interests of the

organization commissioning the research. More often than not, Media Content Analysis studies take into consideration variables such as these:

**Media Vehicle Variables**, such as date of publication or broadcast frequency of publication or broadcast of the media vehicle, media vehicle or type (i.e., whether the item appeared in a newspaper, magazine, a newsletter, on radio, or on television), and geographic reach (i.e., region, state, city, or ADI markets in which the item appeared).

**Placement or News Item Variables**, such as source of the story (i.e., a press release, a press conference, a special event, or whether the media initiated the item on their own), story form or type (a news story, feature article, editorial, column, or letter to the editor), degree of exposure (i.e., column inches or number of paragraphs if the item appeared in print, number of seconds or minutes of air time if the item was broadcast), and the story's author (i.e., the byline or name of the broadcaster).

**Audience or "Reach" Variables.** The focus here usually is on total number of placements, media impressions, and/or circulation or potential overall audience reached—that is, total readers of a newspaper or magazine, total viewers and listeners to a radio or television broadcast. The term "impressions" or "opportunity to see" usually refers to the total audited circulation of a publication. For example, if *The Wall Street Journal* has an audited circulation of 1.5 million, one article in that newspaper might be said to generate 1.5 million impressions or opportunities to see the story. Two articles would generate 3 million impressions, and so on. Often more important than impressions is the issue of whether a story reached an organization's target audience group by specific demographic segments. These data often can be obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau or from various commercial organizations, such as Standard Rate and Data Services. In addition to considering a publication's actual circulation figures, researchers often also take into consideration how many other individuals might possibly be exposed to a given media vehicle because that publication has been routed or passed on to others.

**Subject or Topic Variables**, such as who was mentioned and in what context, how prominently were key organizations and/or their competitors referred to or featured in the press coverage (i.e., were companies cited in the headline, in the body copy only, in both, etc.), who was quoted and how frequently, how much coverage or "share of voice" did an organization receive in comparison to its competitors, what issues and messages were covered and to what extent, how were different individuals and groups positioned—as leaders, as followers, or another way?

**Judgment or Subjective Variables.** The focus here usually is on the stance or tone of the item, as that item pertains to a given organization and/or its competitors. Usually, tone implies some assessment as to whether or not the item is positive, negative, or neutral; favorable, unfavorable, or balanced. It is extremely important to recognize that measuring

stance or tone is usually a highly subjective measure, open to a possibly different interpretation by others. Clearly defined criteria or ground rules for assessing positives and negatives—and from whose perspective—need to be established beforehand in order for stance or tone measures to have any credibility as part of Media Content Analysis.

“Advertising Equivalency” is often an issue that is raised in connection with Media Content Analysis studies. Basically, advertising equivalency is a means of converting editorial space into advertising costs, by measuring the amount of editorial coverage and then calculating what it would have cost to buy that space, if it had been advertising.

Most reputable researchers contend that “advertising equivalency” computations are of questionable validity. In many cases, it may not even be possible to assign an advertising equivalency score to a given amount of editorial coverage (e.g., many newspapers and/or magazines do not sell advertising space on their front pages or their front covers; thus, if an article were to appear in that space, it would be impossible to calculate an appropriate advertising equivalency cost, since advertising could never ever appear there).

Some organizations artificially multiply the estimated value of a “possible” editorial placement in comparison to advertisement by a factor of 2, 3, 5, 8, or whatever other inflated number they might wish to come up with, to take into account their own perception that editorial space is *always* of more value than is advertising space. Most reputable researchers view such arbitrary “weighting” schemes aimed at enhancing the alleged value of editorial coverage as unethical, dishonest, and not at all supported by the research literature. Although some studies have, at times, shown that editorial coverage is sometimes more credible or believable than advertising coverage, other studies have shown the direct opposite, and there is, as yet, no clearly established consensus in the communications field regarding which is truly more effective: publicity or advertising. In reality, it depends on an endless number of factors.

Sometimes, when doing Media Content Analysis, organizations may apply weights to given messages that are being disseminated, simply because they regard some of their messages as more important than others, or give greater credence (or weight) to an article that not only appears in the form of text, but also is accompanied by a photo or a graphic treatment. Given that the future is visuals, organizations are more and more beginning to measure not only words, but also pictures.

It should be noted that whatever ground rules, criteria, and variables are built into a Media Content Analysis, whatever “counting” approaches are utilized to turn qualitative information into quantitative form, it is important that all of the elements and components involved be clearly defined and explained up front by whoever is doing the study. The particular system of media analysis that is applied and utilized by one researcher

should—if a second researcher were called in and given the same brief and the same basic criteria pertaining to the aims of the study—result in broadly similar research findings and conclusions.

## 2. Cyberspace Analysis

Increasingly, a key measure of an organization's image or reputation and of how that organization might be positioned is the chatter and discussion about that organization in cyberspace—specifically, in chat rooms, forums, and new groups on the World Wide Web. The same criteria used in analyzing print and broadcast articles can be applied when analyzing postings on the Internet.

What appears in print is frequently commented about and editorialized about on the Web. Therefore, one component of *PR output* measurement ought to be a review and analysis of Web postings.

In addition, a second *output* measure of cyberspace might be a review and analysis of Website traffic patterns. For example, some of the variables that ought to be considered when designing and carrying out Cyberspace Analysis might include deconstructing "hits" (i.e., examining the requests for a file of visitors to the Internet), a review of click-throughs and/or flash-click streams, an assessment of home page visits, domain tracking and analysis, an assessment of bytes transferred, a review of time spent per page, traffic times, browsers used, and the number of people filling out and returning feedback forms.

Best practices for this type of research are covered in "Getting Started On Interactive Media Measurement," available from the Advertising Research Foundation, 641 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10022, and "Hits Are Not Enough: How to *Really* Measure Web Site Success," prepared by *Interactive Marketing News* and available from Phillips Business Information, Inc., 1201 Seven Locks Road, Potomac, MD 20854.

## 3. Trade Shows and Event Measurement

Frequently, the intent of a public relations programs or activity is simply to achieve exposure for an organization, its products or services, through staging trade shows, holding special events and meetings, involvement in speakers' programs, and the like.

For shows and events, obviously one possible *output* measure is an assessment of total attendance, not just an actual count of those who showed up, but also an assessment of the types of individuals present, the number of interviews that were generated and conducted in connection with the event, and the number of promotional materials that were distributed. In addition, if the show is used as an opportunity for editorial visits, one can

measure the effectiveness of those visits by conducting a content analysis of the resulting articles.

#### 4. Public Opinion Polls

Although most surveys that are designed and carried out are commissioned to measure *PR outcomes* rather than *PR outputs*, public opinion polls are often carried out in an effort to determine whether or not key target audience groups have, indeed, been exposed to particular messages, themes, or concepts and to assess the overall effectiveness of a given presentation or promotional effort. For example, conducting a brief survey immediately following a speech or the holding of a special event to assess the short-term impact of that particular activity would constitute a form of *PR output* measurement.

### GETTING SPECIFIC: STANDARDS FOR MEASURING PR OUTCOMES

Just as there are many tools and techniques that PR practitioners can utilize to begin to measure *PR outputs*, there also are many that can be used to measure *PR outcomes*. Some of those most frequently relied on include surveys (of all types), focus groups, before-and-after polls, ethnographic studies (relying on observation, participation, and/or role playing techniques), and experimental and quasi-experimental research designs.

Best practices for both qualitative and quantitative research are covered in the Advertising Research Foundation's two documents: "Guidelines for the Public Use of Market and Opinion Research" and the *ARF Guidelines Handbook: A Compendium of Guidelines to Good Advertising, Marketing and Media Research Practice*. Both are available from the Advertising Research Foundation, 641 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10022.

Ultimately, one intent of public relations is to inform and persuade key target audience groups regarding topics and issues that are of importance to a given organization, with the hope that this will lead those publics to act in a certain way. Usually, this involves four different types of *outcome* measures: Awareness and Comprehension Measurements, Recall and Retention Measurements, Attitude and Preference Measurements, and Behavior Measurements.

#### I. Awareness and Comprehension Measurements

The usual starting point for any *PR outcome* measurement is to determine whether target audience groups actually *received* the messages directed at them, paid *attention* to them, and *understood* the messages.

Obviously, if one is introducing a new product or concept to the marketplace for the first time—one that has never been seen or discussed before—it is reasonable to assume that prior to public relations and/or related communication activities being launched, that familiarity and awareness levels would be at zero. However, many organizations have established some type of “presence” in the marketplace and, thus, it is important to obtain benchmark data against which to measure any possible changes in awareness and/or comprehension levels.

Measuring awareness and comprehension levels requires some type of primary research with representatives of key target audience groups.

It is important to keep in mind that **Qualitative Research** (e.g., focus groups, one-on-one depth interviews, convenience polling) is usually open-ended, free response, and unstructured in format; generally relies on nonrandom samples; and is rarely “projectable” to larger audiences.

**Quantitative Research** (e.g., telephone, mail, mall, fax, and e-mail polls), on the other hand, although it may contain some open-ended questions, is far more apt to involve the use of closed-ended, forced choice questions that are highly structured in format, generally relies on random samples, and usually is “projectable” to larger audiences.

To determine whether there have been any changes at all in audience awareness and comprehension levels usually requires some type of comparative studies—that is, either a *before* and *after* survey to measure possible change from one period of time to another, or some type of “test” and “control” group study, in which one segment of a target audience group is deliberately exposed to a given message or concept and a second segment is not, with research conducted with both groups to determine if one segment is now better informed regarding the issues than the other.

## 2. Recall and Retention Measurements

Traditionally, advertising practitioners have paid much more attention to recall and retention measurement than have those in the public relations field.

It is quite common in advertising, after a series of ads have appeared either in the print or the broadcast media, for research to be fielded to determine whether or not those individuals to whom the ad messages have been targeted actually recall those messages on both an unaided and aided basis. Similarly, several weeks after the ads have run, follow-up studies are often fielded to determine if those in the target audience group have retained any of the key themes, concepts, and messages that were contained in the original advertising copy.

Although recall and retention studies have not been done that frequently by public relations practitioners, they clearly are an important form of

*outcome* measurement that ought to be seriously considered by PR professionals. Various data collection techniques can be used when conducting such studies, including telephone, face-to-face, mail, mall, e-mail, and fax polling.

When conducting such studies, it is extremely important that those individuals fielding the project clearly differentiate between messages that are disseminated via PR techniques (e.g., through stories in the media, by word of mouth, at a special event, through a speech, etc.) from those that are disseminated via paid advertising or through marketing promotional efforts. For example, it is never enough to simply report that someone claims they read, heard, or saw a particular item; it is more important to determine whether that individual can determine if the item in question happened to be a news story that appeared in editorial form or was a paid message that someone placed through advertising. Very often, it is difficult for the “average” consumer to differentiate between the two.

### 3. Attitude and Preference Measurements

When it comes to seeking to measure the overall impact or effectiveness of a particular public relations program or activity, assessing individuals’ opinions, attitudes, and preferences become extremely important measures of possible *outcomes*.

It needs to be kept in mind that “opinion research” generally measures what people say about something; that is, their verbal expressions or spoken or written points of view. “Attitude research,” on the other hand, is far deeper and more complex. Usually, attitude research measures not only what people say about something, but also what they know and think (their mental or cognitive predispositions), what they feel (their emotions), and how they are inclined to act (their motivational or drive tendencies).

“Opinion research” is easier to do because one can usually obtain the information desired in a very direct fashion just by asking a few questions. “Attitude research,” however, is far harder and often more expensive to carry out because the information desired often has to be collected in an indirect fashion. For example, one can easily measure people’s *stated* positions on racial and/or ethnic prejudice by simply asking one or several direct questions. However, actually determining whether someone is *in actual fact* racially and/or ethnically prejudiced usually would necessitate asking a series of indirect questions aimed at obtaining a better understanding of people’s cognitions, feelings, and motivational or drive tendencies regarding that topic or issue.

Preference implies that an individual is or will be making a choice, which means that preference measurement, more often than not, ought to include some alternatives, either competitive or perceived competitive products

or organizations. To determine the impact of public relations preference *outcomes* usually necessitates some type of audience exposure to specific public relations *outputs* (e.g., an article, a white paper, a speech, or participation in an activity or event), with research then carried out to determine the overall likelihood of people preferring one product, service, or organization to another.

Usually, opinion, attitude, and preference measurement projects involve interviews not only with those in the public at large, but also with special target audience groups, such as those in the media, business leaders, academicians, security analysts, and portfolio managers, those in the health, medical, and scientific community, government officials, and representatives of civic, cultural, and service organizations. Opinion, attitude, and preference measurement research can be carried out in many different ways, through focus groups, through qualitative and quantitative surveys, and even through panels.

#### 4. Behavior Measurements

The ultimate test of effectiveness—the highest *outcome* measure possible—is whether the behavior of the target audience has changed, at least to some degree, as a result of the public relations program or activity.

For most media relations programs, if you have changed the behavior of the editor and/or reporter so that what he or she writes primarily reflects an organization's key messages, then that organization has achieved a measure of behavior change.

However, measuring behavior is hard because it is often difficult to prove cause-and-effect relationships. The more specific the desired *outcome* and the more focused the PR program or activity that relates to that hoped-for end result, the easier it is to measure PR behavior change. For example, if the intent of a public relations program or activity is to raise more funds for a nonprofit institution and if one can show after the campaign has been concluded that there has, indeed, been increased funding, then one can begin to surmise that the PR activity had a role to play in the behavior change. Or, to give another example: for measuring the effectiveness of a public affairs or government relations program targeted at legislators or regulators, the desired *outcome*—more often than not—would *not only* be to get legislators or regulators to change their views, but *more importantly* to have those legislators and regulators either pass or implement a new set of laws or regulations that reflect the aims of the campaign. Behavior change requires someone to act differently than they have in the past.

More often than not, measuring behavior change requires a broad array of data collection tools and techniques, among them before-and-after surveys, research utilizing ethnographic techniques (e.g., observation, participation, and role playing), the utilization of experimental and

quasi-experimental research designs, and studies that rely on multivariate analyses and sophisticated statistical applications and processes).

What is crucial to bear in mind in connection with PR *outcome* behavior measurement studies is that measuring *correlations*—that is, the associations or relationships that might exist between two variables—is relatively easy. Measuring *causation*—that is, seeking to prove that X was the reason that Y happened—is extremely difficult. Often, there are too many intervening variables that need to be taken into consideration.

Those doing PR *outcome* behavior-measurement studies need to keep in mind these three requirements that need to exist in order to support or document that some activity or event caused something to happen: 1) cause must *always* precede the effect in time; 2) there needs to be a relationship between the two variables under study; and 3) the observed relationship between the two variables cannot be explained away as being due to the influence of some third variable that possibly caused both of them.

The key to effective behavior measurement is a sound, well thought out, reliable, and valid research concept and design. Researchers doing such studies need to make sure that study or test conditions or responses are relevant to the situation to which the findings are supposed to related, and also clearly demonstrate that the analysis and conclusions that are reached are indeed supported and documented by the fieldwork and data collection that was carried out.

### QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE PUT TO THOSE ORGANIZATIONS THAT COMMISSION PR EVALUATION STUDIES

Here are some of the key questions that those who commission PR evaluations studies ought to ask themselves before they begin, and also the types of questions that those who actually carry out the assignment ought to ask their clients to answer before the project is launched:

- What are, or were, the specific goals and/or objectives of the public relations, public affairs, and/or marketing communications program, and can these be at all stated in a quantitative or measurable fashion (e.g., To double the number of inquiries received from one year to the next? To increase media coverage by achieving greater “share of voice” in one year than in a previous year? To have certain legislation passed? To enhance or improve brand, product, or corporate image or reputation)?
- Who are, or were, the principal individuals serving as spokespersons for the organization during the communications effort?
- What are, or were, the principal themes, concepts, and messages that the organization was interested in disseminating?

- Who were the principal target audience groups to whom these messages were directed?
- Which channels of communication were used and/or deemed most important to use in disseminating the messages (e.g., the media, word-of-mouth, direct mail, special events)?
- What specific public relations strategies and tactics were used to carry out the program? What were the specific components or elements of the campaign?
- What is, or was, the timeline for the overall public relations program or project?
- What is, or were, the desired or hoped-for outputs and/or out-comes of the public relations effort? If those particular hoped-for outputs and/or outcomes could, for some reason, not be met, what alternative outputs and/or outcomes would the organization be willing to accept?
- How does what is, or has happened, in connection with the organization's public relations effort related to what is, or has happened, in connection with related activities or programs in other areas of the company, such as advertising, marketing, and internal communications?
- Who are the organization's principal competitors? Who are their spokespersons? What are the key themes, concepts, and messages that they are seeking to disseminate? Who are their key target audience groups? What channels of communications are they most frequently utilizing?
- Which media vehicles are, or were, most important to reach for the particular public relations and/or marketing communications activities that were undertaken?
- What were the specific public relations materials and resources utilized as part of the effort? Would it be possible to obtain and review copies of any relevant press releases, brochures, speeches, and promotional materials that were produced and distributed as part of the program?
- What information is already available to the organization that can be utilized by those carrying out the evaluative research assignment to avoid reinventing the wheel and to build on what is already known?
- If part of the project involves an assessment of media coverage, who will be responsible for collecting the clips or copies of broadcast material that will have been generated? What are the ground rules and/or parameters for clip and/or broadcast material assessment?
- What major issues or topics pertaining to the public relations undertaking are, or have been, of greatest importance to the organization commissioning the evaluation research project?
- What is the timeline for the PR evaluation research effort? What are the budgetary parameters and/or limitations for the assignment? Do priorities have to be set?
- Who will be the ultimate recipients of the research findings?

- How will whatever information that is collected be used by the organization that is commissioning the research?

### **QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE PUT TO THOSE RESEARCH SUPPLIERS, AGENCIES, AND CONSULTING FIRMS THAT ACTUALLY CONDUCT PR EVALUATION STUDIES**

Here are some of the key questions that ought to be put to those who actually are asked to carry out a PR evaluation research project before the assignment is launched:

- What is, or will be, the actual research design or plan for the PR evaluation project? Is there, or will there be, a full description in non-technical language of what is to be measured, how the data are to be collected, tabulated, analyzed, and reported?
- Will the research design be consistent with the stated purpose of the PR evaluation study that is to be conducted? Is there, or will there be, a precise statement of the universe or population to be studied? Does, or will, the sampling source or frame fairly represent the total universe or population under study?
- Who will actually be supervising and/or carrying out the PR evaluation project? What is, or are, their backgrounds and experience levels? Have they ever done research like this before? Can they give references?
- Who will actually be doing the field work? If the assignment includes media content analysis, who actually will be reading the clips or viewing and/or listening to the broadcast video/audio tapes? If the assignments involve focus groups, who will be moderating the sessions? If the study involves conducting interviews, who will be doing those and how will they be trained, briefed, and monitored?
- What quality control mechanisms have been built into the study to assure that all "readers," "moderators," and "interviewers" adhere to the research design and study parameters.
- Who will be preparing any of the data collection instruments, including tally sheets or forms for media content analysis studies, topic guides for focus group projects, and/or questionnaires for telephone, face-to-face, or mail survey research projects? What role will the organization commissioning the PR evaluation assignment be asked, or be permitted, to ply in the final review and approval of these data collection instruments?
- Will there be a written set of instructions and guidelines for the "readers," the "moderators," and the "interviewers"?
- Will the coding rules and procedures be available for review?
- If the data are weighted, will the range of the weights be reported? Will the basis for the weights be described and evaluated? Will the effect of the weights on the reliability of the final estimates be reported?

- Will the sample that is eventually drawn be large enough to provide stable findings? Will sampling error limits be shown, if they can be computed? Will the sample's reliability be discussed in language that can clearly be understood without a technical knowledge of statistics?
- How projectable will the research findings be to the total universe or population under study? Will it be clear which respondents or which media vehicles are under-represented, or not represented at all, as part of the research undertaking?
- How will the data processing be handled? Who will be responsible for preparing a tab plan for the project? Which analytical and demographic variables will be included as part of the analysis and interpretation?
- How will the research finding and implications be reported? If there are findings based on the data that were collected, but the implications and/or recommendations stemming from the study go far beyond the actual data that were collected, will there be some effort made to separate the conclusions and observations that are specifically based on the data from those that are not?
- Will there be a statement on the limitations of the research and possible misinterpretations of the findings?
- How will the project be budgeted? Can budget parameters be laid out prior to the actual launch of the assignment? What contingencies can be built into the budget to prevent any unexpected surprises or changes once the project is in the field or is approaching the completion stage?

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