Campaigning organisations and pressure groups

Introduction

Campaigning organisations and pressure groups (or activist groups as they are also known) are the embodiment of active publics (Grunig and Hunt 1984). They are groups of people who share a common interest or concern and have come together to do something about it – whether to march, raise funds, change public policy, prevent something from happening (such as an airport extension or the damming of a valley), make something happen (such as winning the vote for black people in South Africa) or just to raise awareness about an issue.

This chapter explores some of the motivations for these groups and some of the activities and tactics employed by them. It also examines the role of public relations, both within the activist groups and in the organisations or companies that might have inspired their development.

Types of campaigning organisation

When talking about campaigning organisations, the public relations literature frequently refers to 'activists'. Activists are regarded as a challenge to public relations practitioners working for corporations but it should also be borne in mind that activist organisations employ public relations practitioners too. Activists include 'special interest groups, pressure groups, issue groups, grassroots organizations, or social movement organizations' (Smith 1996).

Trade unions

Trade unions were formed on a mass scale in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century to represent the workers employed in major industries such as cotton, mining, metallurgy and shipping. Elsewhere in Europe, the trade union movement grew up around ports and other forms of transport such as railways. Later, especially in France, public service unions were formed to represent employees of the state. What united these very different groups of workers was the growing influence of socialist ideology, particularly the idea that the working classes could be organised politically and did not have to put up with social injustice (Hobsbawn 1987).

Today, trade unions exist across the globe to protect workers' rights and to campaign for improved pay and conditions for their members. These groups have become very formalised with written constitutions and a clear set of objectives and rules. However, in some countries, such as Burma and Equatorial Guinea, it is illegal to belong to a union. In other countries, it is positively dangerous. The most dangerous place in 2000 was Colombia, where 153 trade unionists were assassinated or 'disappeared'. According to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' annual survey of violations of trade union rights (www.globalpolicy.org), there are 108 countries that put up legal obstacles to union membership. In most democracies, union membership is optional. However, in the USA, some employers hire professional 'union busters' to break up any unions at their workplaces. The different unions often have to work hard to win members. Also many countries have introduced legislation to curb the power of trade unions, often making it impossible or very difficult for workers to withdraw their labour by striking, thereby taking from them their most effective tool of protest or persuasion. (See Think about 29.1.)

Charities

Organisations in the UK can become registered charities as long as their purpose and function fit the rules of the Charity Commission for England and Wales. The 'essential requirement of charities is that they operate for the public benefit and independently of government or commercial interests' (Charity Commission 2005). The Charity Commission regulates the activities of charities through regular visits and checks and maintains a register of charities that anyone can inspect. This registration gives the benefit of certain financial advantages (those making donations can have the amount of their gift increased by the tax they would have paid had they kept the money for themselves) and the credibility of having been recognised as a properly run organisation.

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think about 29.1   Employees' freedom of expression

As a public relations officer in a company, you might be responsible for internal communication and helping to maintain staff morale. How important do you think it is for staff to be able to express their views without fear of reprisal? How might you go about gauging staff views and morale?

You might like to consider the following quotes about the significance of good employee relationships. 'Recognition of the efficient use of human resources for business success, together with advances in social democracy have highlighted the increasing importance of employee involvement and industrial partnership including the role played by trade unions' (Coupar 1994: 45–50 in Mullins 1999).

'No organisation can perform at its best unless each employee is committed to the corporate objectives and works as an effective team member. That is not going to happen if the employee's views are not listened to within an open two-way dialogue' (Mullins 1999: 651).

Feedback   You would need to consider organisational culture and to what extent this 'allows' views to be expressed, either formally through trade union representation or through upward communication channels. Bear in mind that formal representations by trade unions are made to the human resources function, not public relations.

To gauge staff views and morale in a culture where upward communication channels are encouraged, you could carry out a communications audit. (See also Chapter 17 to identify the respective roles and responsibilities of human resources and public relations functions.)

PICTURE 29.1   'Each time a person stands up for an idea, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope; and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest web of oppression and resistance', Robert F. Kennedy, speaking in South Africa, 1966 (*source:* Stuart Franklin/Magnum Photos).

Registered charities exist: to alleviate suffering for people or animals; work to develop or educate in particular ways; or to do good works in society. Their campaigning is mainly to raise funds for the causes that they exist to help and to raise awareness about their work. However, not all campaigning groups would be acceptable to the Charity Commission, as these groups often engage in overtly political activities and persuasion. For example, Amnesty International is a human rights organisation and its main campaigning work is to free prisoners of conscience (those imprisoned anywhere in the world because of their beliefs and attitudes) and abolish the death penalty. This is not acceptable to the Charity Commission. However, Amnesty has established an educational section, which prepares packs for school projects and publishes research, which *is* a registered charity. (See Think about 29.2.)

Most campaigning organisations and pressure groups depend on attracting members to create an

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think about 29.2   **Role of charities**

In 1994 Oxfam entered into the public debate about the situation in Rwanda, where mass killings together with the resultant refugee crisis had led to the deaths of millions. They pointed to the failure of governments to act decisively to prevent these deaths and were criticised severely by then UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who called on the Charity Commission to check their rulebook. Rather than have its charitable status revoked, Oxfam retreated.

What do you think about this situation? Should charities just deal with the problems *after* the event or should they be free to make political statements that might embarrass the very governments who have given them financial help through the taxation system?

Feedback   Charities in the UK are free to set up campaigning sections that do not have the same financial benefits as charitable status, but that do share the same positioning as the umbrella brand (see Chapter 26, which discusses branding).

Merging interests – Cancer Research UK

Until February 2002 those wanting to support research into causes of, and cures for, cancer had a choice between the two leading charities – the Cancer Research Campaign and the Imperial Cancer Research Fund – as well as many smaller others, often focused on specific types of cancer. The two big ones have now joined together, as Cancer Research UK, to combine their efforts and impact.

income stream and swell the ranks of supporters who will take part in and generate activities to achieve their objectives. This puts them in competition with other groups, including others with the same or very similar objectives.

Within less than 10 years of the AIDS crisis coming to the public's attention, there are 107 organisations in the UK that have been set up to raise funds for research and alleviate the problems of sufferers. The current Terrance Higgins Trust is an amalgamation of five organisations based in five different cities, which merged in the late 1990s:

■ Bridgeside in Leeds
■ HIV Network in Coventry
■ Sussex AIDS Centre in Brighton
■ OXAIDS in Oxford
■ Terrance Higgins Trust in London.

As its Chief Executive, Nick Partridge, said: 'This decision by trustees and agencies of all those involved sets a precedent for the voluntary sector, where mergers are still relatively rare' (BBC news website, 27 January 1999). (See Mini case study 29.1 and Think about 29.3).

Pressure groups

In this chapter we talk about pressure groups. In US public relations literature, these groups are referred to as activist groups whose 'primary purpose is to influence public policy, organizational action, or social norms and values' (Smith and Ferguson 2001: 292). Drawing on studies in political science, sociology, communication and public relations, three perspectives are put forward on how pressure or activist organisations are formed:

■ the macro-level perspective
■ the publics perspective
■ the developmental perspective (Smith and Ferguson 2001).

The *macro-level perspective* is concerned with the political, economic and cultural conditions within a particular country that may encourage activism. It has been assumed that democratic values such as the freedom of expression provides the basis for activism and particularly economic activism arising from class inequalities. (See Chapter 5 for a discussion of democracy and its underpinning values.) However, activism today embraces publics across educational and economic strata, giving rise to the idea of *interest* groups that are interested in securing benefits for themselves and *issue* groups that are more motivated by their moral convictions about policies.

The *publics perspective* is concerned with the communication process whereby people identify shared problems and argue for change in resolving those

think about 29.3   How charities spend their money

Some campaign groups and charities have become so big that they need to raise large sums of money to maintain their own survival before they can spend anything on the cause for which they were first established.

After establishing Surfers Against Sewage (see Case study 29.1) and beginning to succeed, Chris Hines was approached by other environmental groups offering him jobs. His main condition was that he did not want to work in London or for an organisation that paid out the sums necessary to have offices there. He now oversees activities for sustainability for the Eden Project in Cornwall in south-west England.

Do you think he has a point? Check some campaigning organisations' websites for their annual reports and see how their money is spent.

problems. In the situational theory of publics, Grunig developed Dewey's theories on publics to consider their behaviour in various situations. Important to this perspective is the notion that publics are categorised according to their responses to issues. Publics are categorised as all-issue, apathetic, single-issue and hot-issue publics According to situational theory, publics become active publics when an issue they face is seen as a problem, are highly involved in that issue and recognise few constraints in doing something about the problem (Grunig and Hunt 1984).

Single-issue publics, which are often associated with activism, are defined as being: 'Active in one or a small subset of the issues that concerns only a small part of the population. Such issues have included the slaughter of whales or the controversy over the sale of infant formula in developing countries' (Grunig and Repper 1992: 139).

Many big campaigning organisations started out as pressure or activist groups spurred on by a specific issue or concern. They begin in bars, people's homes or at school gates, wherever a group of people move from being an aware to an active public because some-one says: 'What are we going to do about it?' The zeal and fervour that moves small groups to become wider movements has to be strong. One determinant may be charismatic individuals who found the group, hold the vision and protect it, often fiercely.

The *developmental perspective* examines the movement from problem recognition to action. The idea of a 'lifecycle' of activism assumes that there are separate stages that require different communication activities. The five stages identified by Heath (1997) are:

- *strain* – publics recognise issues, define them and seek to gain legitimacy
- *mobilisation* – activists form organisations, establish communication systems and start to mobilise resources to pursue their goals
- *confrontation* – activists push corporations and/or the government to resolve problems
- *negotiation* – various sides in the dispute exchange messages designed to reach a compromise
- *resolution* – the controversy is solved (possibly in part only).

See Think about 29.3 and Activity 29.1, overleaf.

PICTURE 29.2   Tree-climbing protestors – will they succeed in making their point? (*Source:* Andrew Testa/Panos Pictures.)

activity 29.1

Leaders and causes

Can you match the following well-known charismatic activists with their causes and can you think of others?

1	Martin Luther King	a	Banning landmines
2	Gandhi	b	Drop the (world) debt
3	Nelson Mandela	c	Saving rainforests
4	Chris Hines	d	Equal rights in the USA
5	Swampy	e	Votes for black South Africans
6	Sting	f	Surfers Against Sewage
7	Princess Diana	g	Independence for India
8	Bono	h	Protesting about road-building projects

What qualities do these and other leaders have in common?

Feedback

Their campaigns have all depended on 'the *oxygen of publicity*' to create sympathy, generate further actions and develop an identity with the millions that became their followers or members. In other words, like any campaigning organisation, they have needed effective public relations to deliver their messages, build relationships with supporters and persuade people (and sometimes governments) to change their behaviour.

(**Answers:** 1d, 2g, 3e, 4f, 5h, 6c, 7a, 8b)

Definition: The phrase '*oxygen of publicity*' was first used by Margaret Thatcher in a speech to the American Bar Association, referring to the need to 'starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend' in London, 15 July 1985, reported in *The Times* 16 July 1985. It refers to the way that oxygen increases the intensity of a fire, meaning that publicity fans the flames of a cause.

Key issues for public relations practitioners in organisations and campaigning groups

Campaigning organisations and pressure or activist groups have several public relations advantages over many public and private sector organisations and companies. They have a clear vision; they are able to define their objectives simply; they are often controversial and therefore newsworthy and that in turn means that they can attract the support of personalities and other organisations who want to share the media spotlight. Of course, some campaigning organisations also take up unfashionable or unpopular causes and have to work very hard to generate media coverage.

As in any in-house or consultancy role, the public relations person has a duty to ensure that all campaigns, events, sponsorships or tie-ins with others re-

flect and remain true to the original vision on which the organisation was founded. (See Activity 29.2.)

Is all publicity good publicity?

Lavish celebrity dinners in the name of world poverty are often held in the wealthier cities around the world as successful fundraisers but the publicity value of them is questionable. Public relations people need to take great care when balancing the fundraising, publicity, awareness and sympathy needs of the campaigning or pressure groups that they represent.

The irreverent British sense of humour is enjoyed in most of Europe and respected. However, when Amnesty International first staged its *Secret Policeman's Ball* comedy shows, in which famous comedians appeared in sketches about torture, Amnesty's German national office nearly split away from the organisation as it felt unable to be associated with the use of humour about such a serious matter.

The same principle can apply to sponsorship (see Chapter 27) or support of any kind. Companies often use corporate social responsibility (see Chapter 6) to balance the negative aspects of some of their activities. For example, an oil company that has been breaking sanctions and trading with an oppressive regime might appear to be interested in human rights by offering money to Medicins Sans Frontières (a non-partisan charity, based in France, that sends medical

activity 29.2

Being true to the vision

Examine the following list of invented vision statements and decide which of the relevant events in the second list would generate the most publicity:

1 To eradicate world poverty
2 To reduce harmful emissions
3 To stop the export of live animals
4 To stop whaling
5 Fox hunting is good for the countryside

a Blow up a whaling ship in Reykjavik harbour
b Hold a 4x4 driving rally in Hyde Park, London
c Blockade all ports for a bank holiday weekend
d Celebrity 'pie eating 'til they're sick' competition
e Block all city streets with bicycles

Feedback

This short exercise demonstrates the risk of gaining publicity at the expense of the values of the organisation and contradictory to its aims. Of the statements and events, only b and e could be done in the spirit of 5 and 2. All the others have the potential to cause so much nuisance and offence that they could severely damage the cause that they have been staged to help. (Versions of all of them have, however, been done!)

If an organisation with a strongly held vision is short of the funding it needs to promote its work, should it take money from (and thereby give credibility to) a company that makes that money from the very thing that it stands against? Many charities and organisations do so in the belief that they are turning bad money to good use. In public relations terms, what conflicts might this generate in people's perception of both the sponsors and the recipients of the money?

Feedback For the sponsors, payments to an organisation whose ethical standing is greater than its own can be extremely beneficial in reputation terms. It can be seen to share the 'halo' of the recipient of funds, especially if the organisation carries the sponsor's branding. However, for the public relations practitioner working on behalf of a charity or campaign group, there is a need to be aware of the risks involved in taking funds from an organisation that is a target for pressure groups.

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activity 29.3

Pressure group targets

Examine two campaigning websites, www.breastfeeding.com and www.babymilkaction.org, and consider the risks for the charities Help the Aged and Kids' Club in receiving sponsorship funds from Nestlé.

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help into areas of conflict and war to help the wounded on all sides). (See Think about 29.4 and Activity 29.3.)

It is not only companies that like to align themselves with organisations or pressure groups that are generating a lot of media interest. Successful campaigning groups are often approached by would-be or once-were celebrities asking if there is anything they can do for the group. At high-profile events, such as Live Aid in the 1980s, organised by Bob Geldof to raise money for the starving peoples of Africa (repeated as Live 8 in 2005 to put pressure on the G8) many of the musicians who had long since disappeared shot back to fame. There are also disadvantages in public relations terms to working with campaigning organisations and pressure or activist groups. Their causes are often prejudicial to the well-being of large corporate interest groups which cannot afford for them to have their say too loudly. Public relations consultancies are sometimes hired to discredit pressure groups in the interest of the survival of the companies under attack. Compared to those companies, most campaigning or activist groups are under-resourced financially as well as in terms of experience and skills. Many do not survive their attempts at denting corporate power bases. However, modern communication technology and internet campaigning techniques have given poorly resourced and disparate interest groups the power to sway policy and inflict serious corporate damage.

Campaign tactics

Using the world wide web

There are various methods by which pressure groups can use the world wide web to conduct effective campaigns:

Site attack

Software has been designed that will bombard a site with requests for facts or information to such an extent that the whole site becomes non-functional to other users. The World Trade Organisation and Starbucks have both suffered in this way (Thomas 2003).

Hacking

Hackers can access an organisation's email system; for example, in the case of Samsung threats were sent out, apparently from Samsung, to large numbers of customers, resulting in 10,000 complaining emails being sent back during the busiest time of the protest, costing Samsung millions of dollars (Thomas 2003). One nearly successful activist campaign was fought by animal rights activists trying to shut down the Huntingdon Life Sciences laboratories in the UK because it tests products on animals. The company nearly went bankrupt after its shareholders were barraged with often threatening emails advising them to withdraw their investments.

Parody sites

These sites can be even more dangerous than hacking as they can confuse publics. The internet is undoubtedly a very good medium for bringing together likeminded groups, making publics aware, creating dialogues and giving publics opportunities to become active. Shell set up a useful site to build dialogues

mini case study 29.2

Activism in action: 'McLibel'

Most global net campaigns are environmental, human or animal rights based. A very successful tactic in the global arena is to create a corporate bully. The most famous example of this is what became known as the 'McLibel' case. McDonald's sued an unemployed postal worker, Dave Morris, and a community gardener, Helen Steel, for libel in a trial that ran for 313 days in court. The case was brought against the pair following their publication of a pamphlet in 1986 that took McDonald's to task on almost all aspects of its work from third world poverty to the depletion of the rainforest. During the four years of the case McDonald's offered to pay money to a cause of the defendants' choice, in exchange for a promise that all criticism would end, but Steel and Morris chose to go on. As Naomi Klein, in *No Logo* states: 'They saw no reason to give up now. The trial, which had been designed to stem the flow of negative publicity – and to gag and bankrupt Steel and Morris – had been an epic public relations disaster for McDonald's' (Klein 2000: 387).

Although McDonald's' won the case, as aspects in the pamphlet pertaining to food poisoning, cancer and world poverty were not proved, it did not collect the $61,300 that was awarded. By now the pamphlet had been distributed worldwide, with three million copies circulating in the UK alone. *The Guardian* (20 June 1997) reported: 'Not since Pyrrhus has a victor emerged so bedraggled. As PR fiascos go, this action takes the prize for ill-judged and disproportionate response to public criticism.'

The case also gave rise to the McSpotlight website, where the leaflet and trial transcript can be found, along with a debating room where other McDonald's 'horror stories' are exchanged. Klein reported in *No Logo* that by her publication date in 2000 there had already been 65 million visits to the site. This case was revisited in 2004 with an appeal by Morris and Steel to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg claiming that they should have received help with legal costs. In February 2005 they won that appeal.

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with its publics entitled 'Tell Shell'. This was quickly parodied into 'Tells Hell', which search engines would find for the unsuspecting internet surfer who would then learn negative things about Shell's activities, particularly in Nigeria (Thomas 2003). Companies are learning too late that when they register a site, they have to think of all the possible derivations of spelling possible and register those too at the same time – or someone else will! (See Mini case study 29.2.)

Online humour

One of the most useful tools in the campaign kit of the under-resourced organisation or group is humour (see Surfers Against Sewage, Case Study 29.1 (p. 571), for some excellent examples). Corporations often fail to deal with humorous attacks well and fall into the trap of appearing like bullies, which role is then quickly publicised around the world. For example, Nike created a clever online ordering service on which buyers could request a pair of personally customised trainers. It had been ignoring quite vocal protests about its use of low-paid workers in factories with poor employment conditions, known as 'sweatshop labour'. Nike defended its position stating that it was subcontractors whose employment conditions contravened basic human rights. When it declined Junah Perretti's order for a pair of trainers embroidered with the word 'sweatshop', its defensive and humourless response was quickly emailed around the world.

Laura Illia's winning EUPRERA Jos Willems Award entry in 2002 entitled 'Cyberactivism and public relations strategy: new dynamics and relationship rules' detailed a disturbing array of cheap to inflict but seriously damaging ways for groups or individuals to attack their targets. It also made some useful suggestions for public relations people faced with cyberactivists, observing that the internet had changed the dynamics of activism into a new form of pressure and that this had come about as the result of different pressures on corporations. Illia concluded that: 'Each communication medium had to be considered as a relationship medium instead of a communication medium' (Illia 2002).

The simplest of ideas

The simplest of ideas are often the best. For example, one of the largest single protest movements of the second half of the twentieth century was the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). It started in the 1960s when the threat of nuclear war between the USA and Russia seemed real and imminent. The campaign was opposed to all nuclear weapons worldwide and endorsed all forms of non-violent protest. It gained publicity and attracted members by writing letters to newspapers and members of the UK Parliament, writing and distributing leaflets and organising petitions, debates and huge marches and demonstrations. Early marches took three days to walk from a

nuclear base at Aldermaston to central London. Later, campaigners all over the UK carried briefcases (in the late 1960s this would have been far more noticeable than today) to remind people that the US president took one wherever he went, enabling him to launch a nuclear attack at any time.

Another simple idea was the Methodists' refusal to take sugar in hot drinks – this started as a protest against the slave trade and has been handed down, often unwittingly, through families ever since.

People, politics and globalisation

John and Thomson (2003) state in the first line of the introduction to their book entitled *New Activism and the Corporate Response*: 'Capitalism and corporations are under more pressure now than at any time since the Great Depression' (2003: 1).

Although politicians in all democracies complain that apathy is killing the political process (more people voted in reality TV shows than in the European

PICTURE 29.3   Although these campaigns have not yet dealt major final blows for companies, they have had big impacts and changed the direction of policy in a great many boardrooms (*source:* Nick Cobbing/Panos Pictures).

elections in many EU member states in 2004), they overlook the fact that large numbers of people are becoming politically active in other ways. (See also Chapter 5, in which voting turnout is discussed.)

Ethical shopping guides are published and sold in large numbers to inform people who only want to spend their money with companies that will not invest in production or other systems that hurt others or the environment. Naomi Klein's *No Logo* has become an international best seller and an influence on readers' buying habits that is doing real financial harm to major global corporations.

In Britain there are roughly a million members of all the political parties put together but the environmental organisations have about 5 million paid-up members. On 15 February 2003, more than 10 million people marched in cities around the world, with only a few days notice to organise their protest expressing their opposition to the war in Iraq. This action also contradicts the political voting apathy also discussed in Chapter 5.

The interesting thing for politicians is that, in the main, their power is limited to geographical boundaries whereas big corporations now act globally, as do campaigning organisations and pressure groups because this is where differences can be made.

So although globalisation integrates along one dimension (the economic or private), it fragments along another (the political or public) (Reinicke 1998) and that fragmentation is changing people's interaction with political systems.

Campaigning and pressure groups have gone global. When the *World Trade Organisation* or the *G8* meet now, whether in Seattle, Davos or Toronto, there will be a large, well-informed and very vocal body of protesters. They attract international publicity and often embarrass world leaders with their presentation of issues. These protesters have often come from once fragmented single-issue organisations concerning, for example, animal rights or child poverty to form a global alliance against corporate globalisation.

Definition: The *World Trade Organisation* (WTO) comprises 148 countries, and is the 'only global international organization dealing with the rules of trade between nations' (www.wto.org). The WTO, based in Geneva, Switzerland, administers trade agreements, acts as a forum for trade negotiations and handles international trade disputes.

Definition: The *G8* countries are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the USA. Every year, the heads of state or government of these major industrial democracies meet to deal with major economic and political issues.

PricewaterhouseCoopers' 2002 Global Chief Executive Officers' survey (involving over 1100 CEOs drawn from 33 countries) showed that 33% thought that the anti-globalisation movement was a threat to them (www.pcw.com). This demonstrates that business leaders feel threatened by those who question their use of power and their ethics. So, returning to Grunig's situational theory of publics discussed earlier, anti-globalisation campaigners can be seen as active publics who: have formed around an issue that they recognise as a problem; are highly involved in the issue; and recognise few constraints in demonstrating about the problem. (See Think about 29.5.)

Building and evaluating consensus

So what can companies do to fend off threats to their future profitability? As we discussed earlier, the answer is effective public relations. Campaigning and pressure groups have become some of the most important publics with whom companies need to have open dialogues. If conducted effectively, this can lead to genuine working relationships, which will mean changes and compromises on both sides – just like all relationships! Consensus and co-orientation are two of the terms used in public relations that best describe what is needed.

Consensus-oriented public relations (COPR), as formulated by Burkart (1993) is a communication theory based on the theories of communicative action by Habermas (1984). It develops aspects of mutual understanding as described in Grunig and Hunt's 'two-way symmetrical model' (1984), where communication can flow equally back and forth between sender and receiver. (See Chapters 8 and 9 for fuller exploration of these theories.)

The co-orientation process seeks to establish understanding based on truth. The system was developed to deal with situations where there was a conflict between groups. In Burkart's study the conflict was between those who managed landfill and waste disposal and the population local to the proposed sites.

When considering the basis for communicative action theory Habermas presumes the acceptability of certain claims, namely:

- *intelligibility* – the message must be understandable
- *truth* – the message must be factual and accepted as being factual
- *trustworthiness* – the bearer of the message must be honest and accepted as being honest
- *rightness* or *legitimacy* – the messages must be acceptable on the basis of mutually recognised values.

As well as the claims, which must be accepted by both partners in the communication process, Habermas also refers to three dimensions (the *objective*, the *subjective* and the *social* dimensions) of reality to which both parties in a communication relate. As Burkart (1993) summarises, the aim of such a process of understanding is the agreement of both communication partners. Mutual understanding is reached when speaker and listener agree on the truth of assertions (which is the objective dimension of reality), on their truthfulness (the subjective dimension of reality) and on the rightness of their expressed interests (the social dimension of reality). Therefore consensus-oriented public relations, according to the conditions just described, requires that careful analysis be carried out to plan the communication with specific publics and the specific information to be communicated, as shown in Figure 29.1.

Understanding and agreement occur when all that is asserted within these dimensions is not doubted. However, most communication processes do not start and finish here: there is usually at least one area of disagreement and therefore a discourse becomes necessary in which all sides have the same chance to tell their point of view and their arguments. The task of consensus-oriented public relations is the creation of the conditions for such a discourse. In other words, all the involved persons must have the opportunity to doubt the truth of assertions, the truthfulness of expressions and the rightness of interests.
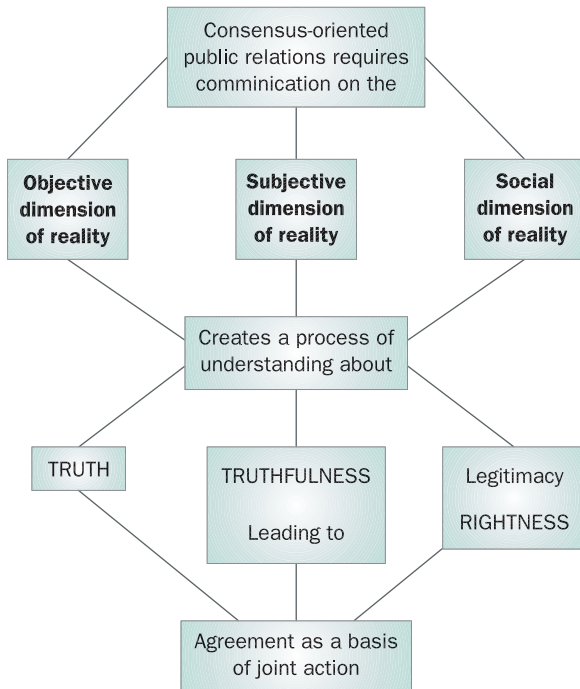
FIGURE 29.1 Consensus-oriented public relations (*source:* adapted from Burkart 1993, Conflict communication – an important part of public relations. Paper presented at the CERP meeting, Strasbourg.)

There must be a predetermined willingness for compromise with the communicator being open to adapt according to the interests of the publics involved and thereby giving the publics some power

over the situation. This occurs in the third stage of the process of consensus-oriented public relations.

Burkart breaks the process down in stages to indicate the care that is needed as the goals are gradually reached. The first stage is based on information concerning which rational judgement can be formed. It does not require the active involvement of a public as it is a one-way process creating the basis for dialogue.

The aims of the second stage are to create dialogue with as great a part of the segment – or public– concerned as possible. The third stage can only work if the second is successful as it is there for discourse to deal with areas of disagreement. The fourth stage exists for an assessment to take place to consider the situation and decide whether further discourse is necessary (see Table 29.1).

Burkart shows how the COPR model is applied where a community plans to build a waste disposal site. In this case, a citizens' group may be formed with the aim of preventing the project going ahead. The local media are likely to support the group and create a conflict situation. Burkart advises that on the basis of the COPR model, public relations managers of the landfill company should consider the following:

- any assertion they make will be examined concerning its truth – e.g. whether figures about the quantity of waste to be deposited are correct
- the persons, companies and organisations involved will be confronted with distrust – e.g. representatives of companies might be taken as biased, or experts/consultants as incompetent or corrupt

TABLE 29.1 Communication process of consensus-oriented public relations (*source:* Burkart 1993, Conflict communication – an important part of public relations. Paper presented at the CERP meeting, Strasbourg.)

	Communication		
	Issues/facts	**Organisation/institution persons**	**Legitimacy of interest**
PR stages	Objective dimension of reality	Subjective dimension of reality	Social dimension of reality
Information	Determination/ definition of relevant facts and terms and explanation of consequences	Explanation of self-interest and intentions, announcement of publics for communication	Justification of interest by reasoning and arguments
Discussion	Relevant facts and terms	Cannot be discussed	Adequacy of arguments
Discourse	Agreement on the rules for evaluation of judgements on relevant facts	Cannot be subject of a discourse	Agreement on rules for the evaluation of judgements on legitimacy
Definition of situation	Agreement on judgements	Agreement on trustworthiness	Agreement on judgements

■ their intention for building the landfill will be doubted in principle – either because the basic strategy for waste disposal is questioned or because the choice of the site for landfill is seen as unjustified on the basis of developing tourism, for example.

If such doubts can be eliminated or prevented from the beginning, then the flow of communication will remain undisturbed (Burkart 2004: 463).

Several companies are going to these lengths to bring groups in to work with them towards consensus (Stafford et al. 2000 contains several examples). Some of the groups involved risk losing members for sitting down to discuss terms with their former enemies, so they too need to move into these new situations with great care and must not be seen to let up the pressure.

Care is also needed when either side in the process feels the need to celebrate some small victory or influence change in direction. Corporations' shareholders could become uncomfortable and pressure groups' members will also be watching closely but it is in the interest of all sides to keep moving towards consensus.

All work of professional standard needs mechanisms with which practitioners can evaluate progress and make informed changes to ongoing strategies. Consensus development is no exception to this, and a model has been devised in recognition of the need for public relations people who are practising two-way communication to be tracking both sides of the relationship around an issue at the same time.

Broom and Dozier's co-orientation model (1990) evaluates the progress in a relationship where there is a topic of mutual concern or interest (See Figure 29.2). One of their examples is the relationship between a paper products company and a conservation group

concerned about the effects on habitats of certain logging processes.

They discuss how the research into the relationship, to discover how each perceives the other, needs to ask the following questions:

■ 'What are the organization's views on the issue?
■ 'What is the dominant view within the organization of the public's view?
■ 'What are the public's actual views on the issue?
■ 'What is the dominant view within the public of the organization's view?' (Broom and Dozier 1990: 37)

The aim of these questions is to calculate the three co-orientation variables – agreement, accuracy and perceived agreement.

Accuracy indicates the extent to which one side's estimate of the other's views is similar to the other's actual views. Perceived agreement represents the extent to which one side's views are similar to their estimate of the other's views. Unlike agreement and accuracy, however, perceived agreement does not describe the relationship between the organization and the public. Rather it describes how one side views the relationship and no doubt affects how it deals with the other side in the relationship. (Broom and Dozier 1990: 38).

If a consensus is to be reached there must be research to establish the distance that has to be travelled by both sides to make it happen. As Broom and Dozier go on to say: 'If two sides hold accurate views of each other's positions on an issue two types of relationships are possible. True consensus occurs when both the organization and the public actually agree and accurately perceive that agreement' (1990: 38). Clearly, the opposite case is also a possibility – where a disagreement is accurately perceived and this state is referred to as *dissensus*.

Greenwood (2003) states in an essay on trade associations and activism : 'Trust is the cement in the relationship between institutions and civil society. When trust breaks down, civil society either withdraws from participation or expresses protest outside the mainstream channels of participation' (2003: 49).

It is the role of the public relations practitioner, on whatever side of a debate, to build and maintain that trust by being open, transparent and fully accountable to publics, not only in words but also in actions. It is essential to build common ground at every stage of a relationship that might be going to work.
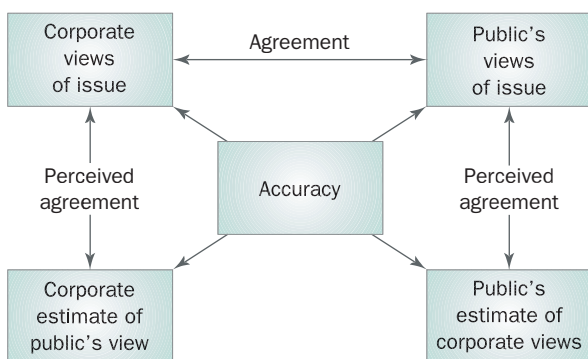

FIGURE 29.2   Co-orientational model of relationships (*source:* Broom, Glen M. *Using Research in Public Relations: Applications to program Management, 1st Edition*, (c) 1990. Adapted by Permission of Pearson Education, Inc, Upper Saddle River, NJ)

Practical guidelines for campaigning public relations

To summarise the key points arising from this chapter for would-be public relations practitioners in campaigning organisations or pressure groups, here is a quick checklist:

1   Agree and state your purpose clearly and simply (vision or mission statement).
2   Establish measurable objectives to give the campaign achievable milestones.
3   Develop your legitimacy – attract third-party endorsement from opinion formers, celebrities, academics, MPs and journalists – and provide them with useful materials like fact sheets.
4   Create a calendar of newsworthy events, meetings, reports and stunts (but remember not to conflict with your stated purpose!).
5   Try to employ humour and always stay within the law (maybe only just sometimes but always definitely on the right side of the line!).
6   Avoid technical jargon and be very clear, with human/animal/environmental examples to show the need for the changes you are seeking.
7   Make sure that those who might join you or follow you know why they should, how they can and what they can do to help.
8   Make good use of technology – set up a website and use email.
9   Provide as many opportunities for your key publics to meet your people, discuss your issues, hear your message and become active – from the stand at the village fête to the international demonstration.
10 When the budgets allow, create a range of merchandise – T-shirts, badges, caps, pens, etc. – people will want to show that they identify with you and these things can be a great source of income.
11 Service your members well with newsletters, online discussion boards, parties, etc.
12 Make them feel welcome and involved.

activity 29.4

Surfers Against Sewage

From the history of Surfers Against Sewage in Case study 29.1, identify the elements of good campaigning practice that helped it towards success.

case study 29.1

Surfers Against Sewage

In December 1989 a wave of national disquiet followed the privatisation of the water companies, arising from a belief that these new companies would prioritise profits over environmental concerns. The issue that gave impetus to the campaign was known as 'the panty liner effect' – surfers making duck-dives were emerging on the other side of a wave with a panty liner stuck to their head: the beaches were strewn with panty liners, condoms, human excrement and sometimes even hypodermic needles.

Early in 1990, 10 surfers met at Martin Mynne's house to discuss the pollution on the beaches and in the sea, and decided to call a public meeting (four people put £10 on the table and it was decided to charge £2 membership).

A press release was produced, which was reviewed in the local media. The public meeting that followed overflowed with 200 people in attendance.

The vision of the new group, Surfers Against Sewage (SAS), was clear and they resolved to campaign on the following demands:

- all sewage to be treated before discharge
- complete cessation of toxic discharge
- sewage and water content to be regarded as a resource rather than as waste
- ensure that the newly privatised water companies' money would be well spent.

The vision united a wide range of beach users, from the cliff walker who witnessed a seal pup surface through a sewage slick, through to the parents who feared for their children's safety on the beach and swimmers who were getting ill.

During the summer of 1990 a campaign of voluntary work to clean beaches was well publicised. The first SAS chairman, Andrew Kingsley-Tubbs, introduced some military tactics to get the attention of the authorities and the gasmask was adopted as a symbol. A national newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, featured surfers wearing gasmasks, and *Sky News* also ran the story.

SAS researched alternative sewage discharge methods and bought shares in South West Water to secure a voice at the company's annual general meeting (AGM). In September it went to South West Water AGM in wetsuits and gasmasks. Mike Hendy, the SAS shareholder, held the floor for 20 minutes resulting in

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case study 29.1 (continued)

full national news media coverage. Channel4 made a documentary on the issue entitled *Our Backyard*.

In addition, surfing magazines gave free advertising space, and by the end of the first summer SAS had £10,000 in the bank. SAS members Chris Hines and Gareth Kent were paid for six weeks to run the campaign office. Six weeks eventually became 10 years and the telephones were always answered.

In the summer of 1991 SAS members decided to take their cause to the heart of government, and appeared at the House of Commons in wetsuits, gasmasks and a large inflatable turd (excrement), which generated a lot of national news coverage.

Chris Hines began to build up a national profile through roadshows. Facts and figures were produced clearly and kept up to date – for example, it was discovered that Jersey, in the Channel Islands, used ultraviolet sewage treatment and that its pollution count was 50 times lower than on most UK beaches.

Academics came forward to offer research and further legitimise the campaign. SAS recognised that it had a high level of responsibility as 10,000 people paid their fees and invested their money in the campaign. However, all the claims made by SAS were reasonable and achievable.

SAS as a brand became increasingly successful through its appeal to young surfers and its use of British toilet humour.

SAS engaged with the political system – at a House of Lords select committee, Chris Hines announced that he would feel 50 times safer putting his head in Jersey's outfall pipe than bathing on many of the UK's beaches. One month later, at the invitation of the island, he did just that, generating further national news media coverage.

In 1991, while maintaining grassroots involvement with surfers, windsurfers were also invited to join SAS resulting in a 400% increase in members. Co-operative Bank's Customers Who Care campaign brought in £20,000 overnight, which was invested in campaigns almost as quickly – members still liked to see demonstrations, and the use of the internet was established to save paper and postage costs.

Evidence that SAS was now becoming 'accepted' by the establishment was demonstrated when Glyn Ford, MEP, invited wetsuited surfers to meet the President of the European Parliament. Further evidence came in 1994, when Welsh Water came 'on side' following a customer consultation. Despite marginally higher costs, Welsh Water launched a policy of full treatment for all coastal discharges. This gave the Welsh a way to stand out and SAS opened the new sewage works.

Merchandise started to become a major earner for SAS, which by now was developing a cult following with its 'must-have' clothing range, badges and car stickers.

SAS, however, resisted the danger of becoming too linked to the establishment, while being careful to maintain negotiations with all parties and understand the pressures on all sides. For example, it took advantage of the five-yearly periodic review of environmental spend that had been introduced by the UK Parliament.

By 1994 SAS messages stopped being a threat and for many they became an opportunity – Wessex Water was next to adopt the full treatment policy. However, members complained that SAS was not visible enough on the beaches and spent too much time in boardrooms. Some members only understood one way of campaigning and had to be given projects to keep them interested.

Campaigners researched and took advantage of events, such as anniversaries of laws passed to improve sewage treatment, which provided them with hooks for the news media. Always light on their feet, SAS campaigners travelled to Brussels from Cornwall (in south-west England) to take advantage of a speaking opportunity to influence the bathing water directive, alongside partners in the European Water Alliance.

SAS also advised the Labour MP Michael Meacher while he was opposition environment spokesman. Once Labour came to power in 1997, Chris Hines was invited to become a special advisor and sewage treatment went further up the political agenda. Seats in parliament were won on the basis of the campaign messages. Pressure was kept up, resulting in levies against all utilities (including the water companies) to pay for environmental clean-ups.

SAS had learned to plan over a long period to put the right pressure on at the right time. By 1999 it had won agreement that all sewage discharges should have at least secondary treatment and a large percentage would have tertiary treatment.

By now there was pressure from European groups to widen the campaign internationally. However, a members' survey in 2000 showed that they wanted to keep the campaign for the UK but take in wider environmental issues.

SAS runs on a £20,000 annual budget but has a £400,000 turnover, nearly all of which is invested in the campaign.

Key points from the campaign to date include:

- avoiding the temptation to take sponsorship from companies whose ethics conflicted with its own, for example, it took part in an education tour with Quiksilver, the leisure goods company
- keeping to a strong image, supplying a regular diet of good imagery for the news media – always being ready with tight soundbites

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- being very disciplined; never breaking the law; keeping it humorous whenever possible and becoming skilled opportunists
- working with scientists
- ensuring representation in each TV region
- maintaining a three-strong campaigns team at headquarters to keep up the pressure.

SAS is now led by Richard Hardy, who has an animal welfare and environmental campaigning background. He too is driven by conscience.

The Independent on Sunday newspaper called SAS 'Britain's coolest pressure group' (23 July 1995); the BBC described its members as 'some of the government's most sophisticated environmental critics'.

The UK population still wastes drinking water by flushing toilets with it, there is still a massive pollution problem in rivers and at sea and too many people are still not listening. There is plenty still to be done by campaigners like SAS.

Source: www.sas.org.uk; www.edenproject.com; interview with Chris Hines (www.chines@edenproject.com) and Richard Hardy

Summary

In this chapter we have discussed the motivations of campaigning organisations and how they form and grow. We have argued that in today's global media environment, campaigning organisations have many advantages over big business and that the internet facilitates debate on issues, helps to recruit members and provides the means for disrupting business. Furthermore, we have argued that campaigning groups may help to reinvigorate political debate, albeit on single issues. We have critically analysed the public relations roles on all sides and the use of two-way communication and consensus in achieving mutual goals. We concluded by presenting key principles of campaigning and demonstrating successful campaigning through a case study.

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McSpotlight: www.mcspotlight.org

PricewaterhouseCoopers – including the CEO Global Survey on risk: www.pcw.com

Teaching Values.com: www.teaching-values.com/goldenrule.html

The Yes Men: www.theyesmen.org

Transnational Institute: www.tni.org/george/articles/dissent.html

Parody sites

Murder King – PETA campaign against Burger King www.muderking.com

Tells Hell: www.tellshell.com

Campaign sites

Baby Milk Action: www.babymilkaction.org

Amsterdam-based NGO that monitors European multinationals: www.ceo.org

www.corpwatch.org.us

Bangkok-based researchers monitoring uneven development: www.focusontheglobalsouth.org

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World social forum

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Global Policy Forum – information on the repression of trade unions around the world: www.globalpolicy.org/socecon/inequal/labor/1010union. htm