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Determining Research Needs: Developing the Research Plan

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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.

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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.

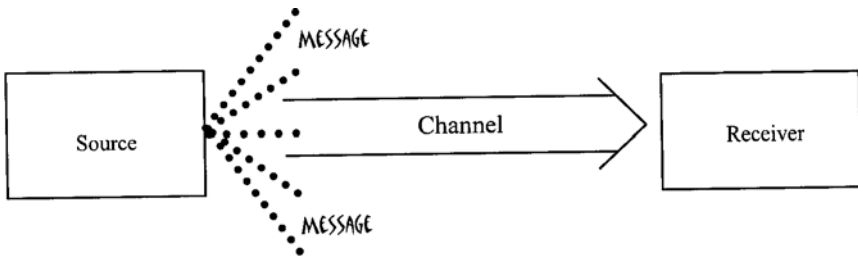


FIG. 4.1. A simplified model of communication. The linear model is useful for its portrayal of the basic elements in the communication process. Chapter 13 discusses important limitations of this model as a representation of the communication process.

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

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

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?

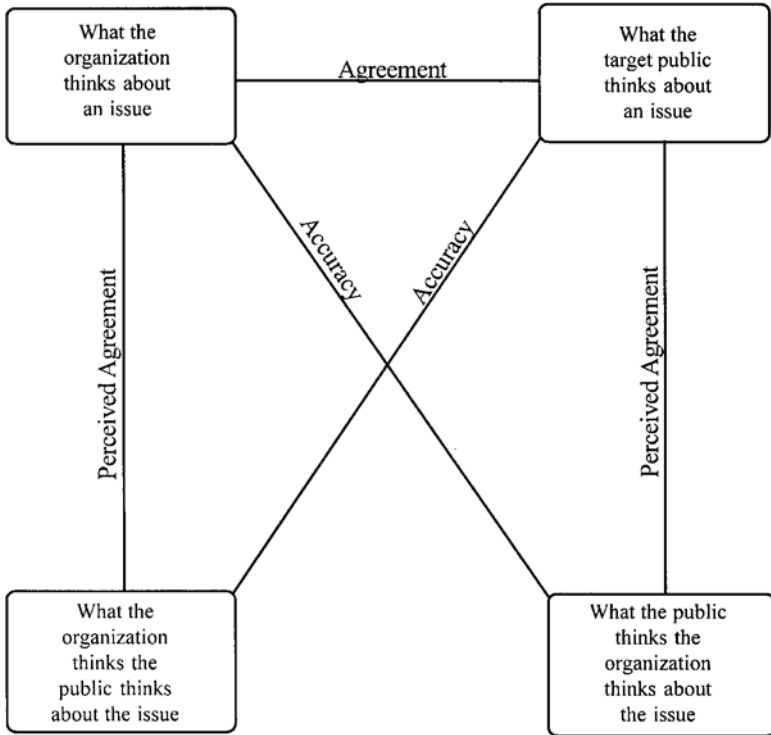


FIG. 4.2. The co-orientation model. The achievement of agreement, accuracy, and perceived agreement constitute *consensus*, which is the ideal outcome for public relations.

- 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.