



## Chapter Four: Public Opinion



### Why is it critical to PR work?

The heart of public PR work lies in attempting to influence the public opinion process.

Most PR programs are designed to:

- persuade people to change their opinion.
- crystallize uninformed or undeveloped opinions.
- reinforce existing opinions.



## Public opinion: what is it?

Public opinion is:

- an elusive and fragile commodity.
- like shifting sands.....subject to change.

It is the aggregate of many individual opinions on a particular issue that affects a group of people. In other words, public opinion represents a consensus.



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## Public opinion is determined by three major factors:

Attitudes

Opinions

Actions

When attitudes become strong enough, they surface in the form of opinions. When opinions become strong enough, they lead to verbal or behavioral actions.

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## Attitudes:

- are evaluations people make about specific problems or issues. They can be positive, negative, or nonexistent.
- can be based on many characteristics such as background, culture, education, knowledge, class, ethnicity, and religion.

## Opinions:

are the expression of an attitude on a particular topic.

## Actions:

- When opinions become strong enough, they lead to actions expressed either verbally or behaviorally.



## How are attitudes influenced?

On any given issue:

- A small percentage expresses strong support
- A small percentage expresses strong opposition
- The vast majority doesn't care much
- This "muddled middle" represents the greatest opportunity for public opinion change. The objective of the PR practitioner is to win support through clear, thoughtful, and persuasive communication. Moving a person from a latent state of attitude formation to a more aware state and finally to an active one becomes a matter of motivation.



## Four theories of attitude change

### 1. Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

- People tend to avoid information that is opposed to their own points of view.
- People tend to seek out information that is consistent with their own points of view.



### 2. Social Judgment Theory

- People have a range of opinions on a certain subject, anchored by a clear attitude.
- Although it is seldom possible to change this anchor position, communicators can work within this range, or "latitude of acceptance," to modify a person's opinion.



### 3. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



- The bottom of the hierarchy contains basic needs, which must first be satisfied before moving upward to higher needs.
- PR practitioners must know their audiences and correctly target their levels for effective message design.

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### 4. Elaboration-Likelihood Model

Attitudes can be changed in one of two ways:

- When we are interested and focused enough on a message, we take a "central" route to decision making.
- When we are not engaged with a message, we need to take a more "peripheral" route to decision making.

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## The power of persuasion

- Persuasion is perhaps THE most essential element in influencing public opinion.
- Persuading is the ultimate goal of the vast majority of PR programs.
- Basically, persuasion means getting another person to do something through advice, reasoning, or just plain arm-twisting.
- All of us are persuaded by different things, which makes the challenge of PR persuading much more complex art form than a science.



## How are people persuaded?

Radical organizer Saul Alinsky says:

“People only understand things in terms of their own experience.....If you try to get your ideas across to others without paying attention to what they have to say to you, you can forget about the whole thing.”

To persuade, you must cite evidence that coincides with people’s own beliefs, emotions, and expectations.



## What kinds of evidence will persuade?

- Facts

Good PR programs always start with research – the facts

- Emotions

We can think, but we also respond to emotional appeals

- Personalizing

People respond to personal experiences and stories

- Appealing to “you”

People want to know, “What’s in it for me?”



## Cantril’s Laws of Public Opinion

- A thoughtful PR program can crystallize attitudes, reinforce beliefs, and occasionally change public opinion. First, the opinions to be changed must be identified and understood. Second, target publics must be clear. Third, the PR professional must have in sharp focus the “laws” that govern public opinion. These “laws” remain pertinent.
  1. Opinion is highly sensitive to important events
  2. Opinion is determined more by events than words
  3. At critical times, we are more sensitive to the adequacy of leadership.
  4. Once self interest is involved, opinions are slow to change
  5. People have more opinions and are able to form opinions more easily on goals than on methods to reach those goals
  6. If people in a democracy are provided with educational opportunities and access to information, public opinion reveals a hardheaded common sense



## Polishing the corporate image

- Organizations must understand that corporate image is a fragile commodity.
- A public's positive perception of an organization takes time to build and time to maintain; it is a commodity that can have a short shelf life if bad things occur for the organization.
- A positive image helps to establish the organization's reputation and even brands its products or services. To improve that image, they must operate with the implicit trust of the public.
- Organizations that seek to distinguish themselves, to have a differentiable image through advertising, for example, must deliver a succinct, savvy, even sparkling message.
- In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, winning favorable public opinion isn't an option – it's a necessity.

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## Managing reputation

- For anyone concerned about public opinion, it all comes down to managing reputation.
- The practice of reputation management has grown among PR agencies and other organizations.
- This practice aligns communications with an organization's character and action.
- Here, organizations are empathetic to society's needs.
- ❖ Although reputation is difficult to measure, it is a tangible asset. Managing reputation is a frontline PR responsibility.
  
- ❖ Review Question:
- Discuss the importance of image to an organization.

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