Corporate Communications of Advocacy: Practical Perspectives and Procedures
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COMPANIES SHOULD NOT be the silent children of society. The right of the corporation to communicate with its employees was established by the Taft-Hartley Act but has been challenged by the NLRB. This latter action has evidently forced some corporate bodies to hesitate in expressing themselves. If the corporation remains semi-mute, not only will it lose its advocacy position, it may surrender its right to communicate by default. The stance of the corporation as communicator — a legal body capable of ideation and expression — changes periodically. However, the need for information remains.

THE EVOLUTION OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Information Orientation

Corresponding with increased labor strife following the second World War, corporations moved from the publication of localized social news to providing information about business and economics. An “information explosion” emanating from corporations during the late 1940’s saw a 200 percent national increase in the number of house organs — from 2,000 to 6,000. But, more important than the increase was the changing message. Articles about an employee’s fishing trip diminished as corporations concentrated on informing employees about company finances, employee benefit plans, and the nature of profits.

Simultaneously, the adversary — the union — was not gagged. With less polished journalistic procedures and less sophisticated methods of reproduction, unions communicated with a sharper rhetoric. Corporate house organs were often as neatly laid out as a journalism student’s term project, printed on the slickest of paper and produced by a professional staff. The unions’ communication vehicle was often flimsy newsprint and mimeo-
graphed broadsides consisting of articles contributed by their membership. But, considering the receiver, the content of the unions' communication was much more issue-oriented. It was not unusual for publications of the same date by company and union, reporting upon the same "factory-territory," to communicate differently. Whereas the pretty company paper would espouse the benefits of a new company-paid insurance plan for employees, the poorly printed union publication would report instances of employee harassment by foremen, the unsanitary conditions of the factory washrooms and the niggardliness of the company in providing lunch time. Corporation executives perhaps believe in the value of communications— but not enough to actually communicate about issues of controversy. In a study specifically analyzing union and company communications Haas and Zagat found that corporations generally did not discuss relevant bargaining issues in their publications whereas such issues were the life-blood of the union publications.

**Expanding the Message and the Receivers**

By the late 1950's some companies were communicating not only to employees, but also to publics beyond the corporate confines. A few firms were even starting to interpret the information they presented and were advocating issues on controversial topics. The General Electric Corporation clearly initiated the establishment of advocacy communications and broadened the corporate audience to include more than just employees. Also in the forefront were the steel companies which organized a communication campaign in 1958–1959 for the purpose of expressing a viewpoint in opposition to other opinions. Another innovator, Caterpillar Tractor Company, engaged in what is probably a classic example of advocacy communications. Caterpillar related and interpreted information in an attempt to persuade employees, townspeople, businessmen, vendors, and opinion leaders of a point of view that was in conflict with established norms—at least the union norm. These organizations were not considered radical or boisterous for communicating with their publics. Actually, the better educated and informed employee of the 1960's often desired to hear where his company stood on issues of controversy. After all, the employee knew where his union stood and where his political party stood—why should he be denied knowing his company's point of view? These advocative pioneers were successful in improving their stature within their communities and were generally welcomed to the public forum. Many in the public saw these companies as progressive firms which dared to bring issue-oriented communications out of the smoke filled room and into the public domain.

In less than twenty years corporations moved from chit-chat to controversy and advocacy. However, it now appears that corporations may again
be turning away from advocacy and retreating to a period of information without interpretation. The era of advocacy may be history – but it need not be! A review of what has been written and what has been done establishes the case for advocacy; guidelines were established for permitting an organization to move from an information base to an advocacy position.

ADVOCACY COMMUNICATIONS IN ACTION

The Perspective Via Literature

A few authors have admonished corporations to get involved. The substance of their writings is that instead of just relating information, corporations should interpret information with an end result in mind. C.J. Dover has been one of the more persistent and adamant contributors to the advocacy cause. He identifies the alibis which corporations used for not engaging in the supposedly "dirty" business of controversy. He charges that "the soft underbelly of American management" is "inert" when it comes to taking a position on controversial issues. But, besides chiding management, he presents them with clear arguments for getting involved in substantive communications.⁷ Lemuel Boulware, the pragmaticist behind the General Electric communication offensive, enunciates the goals of advocacy and the importance of companies communicating with various publics. "The objective [is to]...win the cooperation of the employees and neighbors in their own interest – which, incidently, would also be in the balanced interest of all the 'contributor-claimants'."⁸ Boulware establishes the rationale for advocacy and for communicating with more than just employees. There are more interests to be served than those of one group and there are more sides to issues than those presented by unions, trade groups or chambers of commerce.

Sigband emphasizes that what is said is important. "There is a need for the corporation to inform employees about matters which affect them (and)...interpret management's position on relevant issues to persuade employees to take actions...."⁹ The literature also points to many executives who clearly state the case for advocacy, for instance, Herbert Markley of Timken Roller Bearing Company, who stated..."a company must be a citizen to the community – a good citizen. As a good citizen it should speak up when anything threatens the best interests of the community, directly or indirectly."¹⁰ But, besides these reports of what corporations should do, there are examples of what corporations have done.

The Perspective Via Practice

When the steel companies in 1958–1959 were facing contract settle-
ments with the United Steel Workers (U.S.W.) of America, the companies formed the Steel Companies Coordinating Committee (SCCC). The Committee's purpose was to determine and present the steel companies' case to the public. Five basic themes were developed and prepared for dissemination. The themes related to the U.S.W. bargaining position. The conclusion the companies drew was that the Union's position was not in the best interests of the public. The companies' case was clearly presented to other company executives, representatives of agriculture, veteran groups, business organizations and members of congress. The basic theme of inflation — "inflation robs us all" — was emphasized. If the U.S.W. position was accepted, the companies maintained that steel prices would be increased and the effect would be felt by everyone. The message was important and was disseminated in a manner to reach millions of non-steel people.  

This is advocacy in action; it is above board and in the open. Just as openly the union presented its case to a national audience under the theme: "The More You Earn, The More You Buy." The rhetoric was controversial and the economic bases for each position different and these differences were communicated publicly.

The communications program which General Electric established prior to 1960 exemplified an "ideal" ongoing program which frequently enunciated controversial issues. G.E. feels it has an obligation to communicate with employees on issues of controversy. The company used house organs at local factories to address local publics. To address large audiences, GE utilized commercial time on their popular national television program "General Electric Theatre." When contract termination neared in 1960, the company had the facilities and the transmission routes established to present its case. Also, with a systematic approach they had the advantage of presenting their issues logically over a long period of time. GE did not just erupt one day and ostensibly attack the union. GE's pre-negotiation communications were an extension of their continuing communications programs. Whereas the USCC determined their themes and proceeded, GE was more "argumentative." If the union countered a GE theme or statement, the company's communication program was flexible enough to address or refute that particular issue.

Caterpillar in 1960–1961 engaged in a well-planned multi-media communication program with a negative sounding theme: "Hold The Line On Wages." This appeal intended to demonstrate the mutuality of interests which the company, its employees and publics had in sustaining the Company's competitive international position. Approximately 50% of Caterpillar's sales were made in foreign markets. So, with six different contentions the company presented a case that its sales and therefore employment
would decline if wages were capriciously increased. The communication plan was initiated almost two years before the termination of its labor contract. To implement the plan, the publics were informed of: a) the markets in which CAT sold its US-made product, b) the kinds of competition the company faced at home and abroad, and c) how CAT compared to its competition. Each contention was persuasively and clearly presented. The conclusion was repetitive — the company must hold the line on wages. The benefits of “holding” were directed towards the employee, union, townspeople and vendors. The emphasis was on how “holding the line” would aid the local and national economies.

The case was not only emphatically presented to employees, but also to the local populace. For instance, the company used commercial television to reveal how dollars were pumped into the local economy via its foreign sales. Strongly shown was the local wage issue which, if increased, would result in a decline of foreign sales, and fewer Caterpillar dollars would be available to the local economy. This approach was, of course, highly controversial. Nevertheless, Caterpillar persisted in its contention that failure to hold the line on wages would be detrimental to all of the involved parties. As expected the union vigorously attacked the company contentions. However, because the firm had built its conclusions on a sound foundation over a two-year period the sudden union attacks were weak in comparison to the company’s stance.¹³

The three cited corporate examples clearly indicate that firms can successfully communicate on issues of controversy. These firms not only believed in their position, they were willing to share their beliefs with others — even if they were controversial. For the potential benefit of many publics, these three organizations communicated on issues of controversy; they provided information not otherwise available and a viewpoint the publics had a right to consider.

These three organizations succeeded because of the worth of their message, the development of the issues and the effective methods of presentation. From their advocacy communications, procedures and guidelines can be evolved to aid other organizations which have substantive ideas and want to share them.

PROCEDURES FOR COMMUNICATING AND ADVOCATING

Timeliness

The firm must have very specific and clearly discernible realistic communication goals. These goals should be implemented through the firm’s established communication program. Organizations that have been success-
ful have carefully avoided looking obviously antagonistic. Before becoming too controversial, an effort must be made to inform and educate the recipients. Once the educational base is established, a corporate position on the issues can be presented. Besides implementing the basic guidelines for corporate communication campaigns, the timing and sequencing of messages is crucial and must be developed within the context of the total program.

**Guidelines**

The following guide-posts pertain to the basic elements for approaching, implementing and completing a successful advocacy program.

*An on-going communication program* that is clearly established as a vehicle for relating ideas is necessary for the implementation of introducing controversial ideas. With a communication package that is known to the recipients it is feasible to get corporate ideas accepted. A corporation should use its established media to gradually introduce its non-normative ideas instead of creating new communication lines. This does not mean additional media should not be injected to aid in relating ideas, but there must be an established communication program in which to develop and build the issues of controversy.

*Education must precede persuasion* if the corporation’s advocacy position is to have a basis upon which to build. Before publicly taking a controversial stand the corporation should lay a foundation upon which the issues can stand. The corporation will often be involved in rather complex economic issues that are subject to varied interpretations and analyses. Before getting too controversial it is best to have established the basic rationale for the corporate viewpoint.

*Emphasizing economics rather than emotion* is important. Generally the primary recipients are employee groups that are concerned with the dollars of corporate proposals instead of the pathos. Also, because the corporate campaign by its very nature is lengthy, it is more feasible to build and sustain economic concepts instead of less stable emotional arguments. The corporate controversial campaign will eventually be pinpointed on fewer dollars or benefits for someone — most likely employees. “Waving the flag” will not sustain the corporate stance and therefore economic ramifications must be highlighted.

*Identifying the audiences* and determining what kinds of evidence will be most persuasive to them is vital. There are unionized and nonunionized employees and they will be stirred by different arguments. Local businessmen will “tune-in” to different arguments than will wives of unionized employees. The audiences must be specified, the manner in which to reach them determined and the arguments to which they will be most receptive.
identified. A corporation is many things to many different people—a source of employment, a source of security, a buyer, a seller, an economic barometer for the local community—and therefore no one argument presented in one way will be persuasive to all the audiences.

**Multi-media** will aid in reaching the audience. Because the corporation will need to reach employees, employee families, community opinion leaders, vendors, local entrepreneurs and townspeople, various media will be needed to aid the transmission. No media should be overlooked in aiding the corporate cause; all the media can aid in the educational process.

**Community spirit** is always helpful to the corporation. The tone of advocacy should be established within the context of what is good for the total community—not just what is good for the corporation. This approach will not insure acceptance of a controversial idea, but it may win, instead of reject, some recipients.

**Repetition of a theme** that is rememberable is important. Be it “Inflation Robs Us All” or “Hold the Line,” the various corporate arguments must continually relate to the theme. In this manner the theme can be repeated over and over. But the theme should be supported by many different arguments to make it attractive to different audiences.

**Overcoming impersonalness** will help the corporation to reach some audiences. This is generally a difficult requisite for the corporation to achieve. The huge corporation simply is not one big happy family. But, with the aid of well-informed managers and foremen a corporation can approach and reiterate its perspective on a personal basis.

**Seek the recipient** on the least hostile ground. The environmental setting of the factory and union hall are not geared to benefit the corporation. Therefore, if the corporation can reach the employee at home (e.g., send a neat quarterly company magazine to the wife at home, or address a personal-looking letter to the employee at home) the corporation’s chance for gaining a hearing is enhanced. This calm, not hostile, logical approach of the company will reach many employees. Just because an employee is a union member and talks a good union-line at the factory does not mean he is unwilling to hear the company side of an issue within the confines of his own home. The situation for the company is further enhanced when the company has succeeded in winning the local grocer, the employee’s wife and his child to the corporate viewpoint.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Corporations have successfully conducted programs in advocacy. It takes considerable forethought and meticulous management to engage in such campaigns. Perhaps many firms have remained silent for fear of start-
ing a program they could not adequately complete. This is probably the one best reason for not initiating advocacy communications. But, if a corporation or small firm has a meaningful message for an available audience, then the time and the cost is worth the effort. What good is an uncommunicated idea?

The historical development of corporate communication indicates that companies are breaking out of their confines. The corporate-ostrich does not always find his surroundings ideal, but need he retreat or bury his head? It has been established that corporations can successfully and practically pursue advocacy communications. The right of the corporation to communicate in the advocacy arena must not be conceded.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1The Labor Management Relations Act of 1947 (Taft-Hartley Act) amended the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (Wagner Act) and the Labor Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959 (Landrum-Griffin Act) amended the Taft-Hartley Act. But, maintained is the concept that corporations can communicate: “The expressing of any views, argument or opinion, or the dissemination thereof, whether in written, printed, graphic or visual form, shall not constitute or be evidence of an unfair labor practice under any of the provisions of this act, if such expression contains no threat of reprisal or promise of benefit.” Taft-Hartley Act – Section 8(c) of the Act.

2In a charge brought before the National Labor Relations Board by the International Union of Electrical Workers against General Electric in 1964, the Company was accused and found “guilty” of having “engaged in unfair labor practices affecting commerce within the meaning of various sections of the National Labor Relations Act.” (See, Trial Examiner’s Report of the NLRB: 2-CA-7581, p. 1.) More specifically, the IUE accused the Company of so “marketing their positions” that employees were influenced and equipped so they could not render their own independent judgment. The NLRB decision is now before a federal court.

3The corporation is a resident and has rights of a citizen of that which creates it. “Wherever the word ‘person’ or ‘persons’ is used in Constitutional and statutory provisions, corporations are deemed and considered persons . . .” See Essel Dillavou, et al., Principles of Business Law, 7th ed, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962, pp. 674–57


9Norman B. Sigband, Communication for Management, Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman and Co., 1969, p. 34.

