Developing the Public Relations Campaign

THIRD EDITION

A TEAM-BASED APPROACH

Randy Bobbitt Ruth Sullivan

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A Team-Based Approach

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To our students—past, present, and future—
who remind us every day why we became teachers.

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BRIEF CONTENTS

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CONTENTS

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PREFACE

NEW TO THIS EDITION

- The revised introductory chapter provides more information about how to incorporate communication theories into public relations campaigns.
- A new chapter deals with interactive media, including the Internet, the World Wide Web, and various social media.
- Other chapters throughout the book apply many of the principles to the world of social media and the Internet.
- A new streamlined law and ethics chapter provides guidance on how to avoid legal and ethical pitfalls in designing public relations campaigns, including issues associated with social media.
- New case studies throughout the book based on news stories affecting the public relations industry.
- A revised chapter on background research includes the results of the latest demographic and psychographic research into the media habits and purchasing habits of various age groups.

This book is targeted for students at advanced or "capstone" courses in public relations that typically carry such titles as Advanced Public Relations, Public Relations Campaigns, or Public Relations Program Development. Although it was written with such classes in mind, it was also tested in introductory classes and includes some material general enough to be used in programs in which there is only one omnibus public relations course. The various "discussion starters" at the end of each chapter can be used for either an introductory or advanced public relations course.

The subtitle of the book makes reference to a teaching method known as the competitive agency model. Professors teaching public relations and advertising classes often find a campus organization or local nonprofit organization to serve as the "client," then divide the class into teams that compete against each other to develop campaign proposals in the same way that real-world agencies compete for the business of prospective clients.

In addition to serving as a practical tool to assist students working on team projects and the professors who supervise them, one of the new ideas introduced in this book is the simplification of the public relations process. The traditional formula often taught in public relations classes has for many years been based on the "four-step process" of research, planning (sometimes described as action), communication, and evaluation. In developing this textbook, however, we discovered through conversations with working professionals that the four-step (or RACE) process is not the magic formula it was once thought to be, and in the "real world" it is often difficult to diagram the process. We found that the research and planning steps are often muddled together, with little or no visible dividing line.

Another problem with the RACE formula is that it oversimplifies the four-step process as one that proceeds from left to right through the four stages, as though a public relations planner could not return to the research phase after moving into the planning stage. In fact, the public relations process is seldom that linear.

For this book, however, we have instead consolidated the research and planning stages, and the result is a three-step process: planning, implementation, and evaluation (PIE). We believe, as do many working professionals we have spoken to, that this three-step model more accurately describes the campaign development process used in the "real world."

The PIE formula, as detailed in Chapters 3 through 10, recognizes that the three components are not watertight compartments that require the program developer to move through the process in a straight line. For example, there may be a case in which public relations planners get to the implementation stage and realize they do not have all the information needed to choose the most effective tactics. Thus, they must return to the planning stage (in this case, for more primary research) to determine the media habits of the audiences.

Like most endeavors of this complexity, this book would not have been possible without the help and inspiration of other people in our lives. We thank the following friends, professors, colleagues, work supervisors, and mentors who have provided guidance and encouragement over the years: Donna Dickerson, Roger Dyer, Jim Foust, Dennis Hale, Don Harrison, John R. Jones, Larry Leslie, Steve Ludd, Eileen Perrigo, Barbara Petersen, Terry Rentner, Hal Shaver, Raymond Smallwood, Bruce Swain, Frank Trimble, Vicki Vega, and Gary Werner. We also thank the faculties and staffs of the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Marshall University, the Department of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, the Department of Communication Arts at the University of West Florida, the library and computer support staffs at all three institutions, and the hundreds of students who have taken our classes and provided valuable feedback on preliminary drafts of the book.

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Randy Bobbitt
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Randy Bobbitt is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of West Florida. In addition to public relations, he has taught courses in journalism, communication law, and communication ethics. Prior to coming to UWF, he taught at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Marshall University, and the University of South Florida.

His research interests include public relations, political communication, popular culture, and communication law and ethics. Prior to college teaching, he worked professionally in both journalism and public relations. He is a past president of the West Virginia Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America and is a frequent speaker at professional and student public relations conferences. He holds a Ph.D. in communication law and policy from Bowling Green State University.

In addition to this book, Professor Bobbitt has published five other books on topics including public relations, communication law and ethics, journalism history, and political communication: *A Big Idea and a Shirt-Tail Full of Type: The Life and Work of Wallace F. Stovall (1995), Who Owns What's Inside the Professor's Head?* (2006), *Lottery Wars: Case Studies in Bible Belt Politics (2007), Exploring Communication Law* (2008), and *Us Against Them: The Political Culture of Talk Radio* (2010).

Ruth Sullivan is a public school teacher in Kenova, West Virginia, and an adjunct professor in the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism at Marshall University, where she has taught courses in public relations and print journalism for more than twenty-five years.

Prior to teaching, she worked in a variety of public relations management positions in both the education and corporate arenas. Her professional background includes work with the West Virginia coal and utility industries, where she focused on safety, environmental, and educational programs, and public education, where she focused on strategic planning and management issues.

Professor Sullivan is a past president of the West Virginia Press Women's Association, past president of River Cities Chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators, and past president of the W. Page Pitt Marshall University School of Journalism and Mass Communications Alumni Association. She earned a master's degree in mass communications from Marshall University and has won numerous national and state awards in communications competitions.

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Part I Background

1

The Nature of Persuasive Campaigns

The term *persuasive campaign* should not be confused with its less admirable cousin, the *propaganda campaign.* By definition, legitimate attempts at persuasion differ from propaganda in several important ways. **Persuasion** is defined as "an effort to gain public support for an opinion or course of action." What is implied in the definition is that the effort is based on truthful and ethical methods. **Propaganda,** on the other hand, is "the attempt to have a viewpoint accepted on the basis of appeals other than the merits of the case." It often uses methods that could be labeled as unethical or manipulative.

Another attempt at drawing a distinction between the terms is to say that persuasion is based on truth, whereas propaganda is based on fiction or exaggeration; persuasion is based on consensus, whereas propaganda tries to set up adversarial relationships or "us against them" scenarios.

In their 1992 book, *Propaganda and Persuasion,* theorists Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell pointed out that the intent of persuasion is to serve the interests of both the persuader and the audience; propaganda, however, generally serves only the interests of the person acting as its source. Jowett and O'Donnell's view is consistent with the longstanding philosophy of public relations programs producing results that are mutually beneficial or "win-win."

Jowett and O'Donnell's work was an expansion of that done during World War II by Columbia University Professor Clyde R. Miller, who founded the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. At first the emphasis was to study the use of propaganda in the war in Europe, but he quickly expanded its scope to include the study of propaganda from all sources, including the Ku Klux Klan, other extremist groups, and the U.S. advertising industry. The institute is still in operation today and identifies—in its publications and on its website—nine common propaganda devices:

1. *Name-calling* is the use of emotional labels that are offered in the place of logic or evidence. Examples of labels applied to individuals include "extremist," "radical," "liberal," "fundamentalist," and "racist." Examples of labels applied to ideas include "social engineering," "radical," "legislating morality," and "counterculture." For example, when critics wanted to generate opposition to President Clinton's proposed health care plan in the early 1990s, they did so in part by referring to Clinton and his wife, Hillary, as representing the "counterculture."

2. *Glittering generalities* represent the opposite of name-calling. Instead of wanting the audience to reject an idea without examining the evidence, a communicator resorting to glittering generalities wants the audience to accept an idea without requiring evidence. What results are generalizations so extreme that receivers disregard the lack of substance behind the appeals. Examples are claims that begin with "Everyone knows that . . ." and "It goes without saying that . . . ." In political campaigns, examples of glittering generalities include a candidate's charges that his or her opponent's proposals are "all style and no substance" or "based on ideas of the past."

3. *Transfer* is a device by which the communicator wants the audience to take the authority, sanction, or prestige of a respected idea and apply it to a new idea that the communicator wants the audience to accept. Examples include the use of symbols such as the cross, representing the Christian church, or Uncle Sam, representing patriotism and love for the country. If a church publication shows the cross being used to promote helping the poor, it implies that helping the poor is something that Christians should do. If a cartoonist draws Uncle Sam in a manner in which he approves of a proposed new law, it implies that the entire country should be in favor of it.

Transfer is often used as a tactic in political campaigns. In the 2002 senatorial race in North Carolina, for example, the campaign of republican Elizabeth Dole aired television commercials emphasizing that democrat Erskine Bowles once served in the administration of former President Bill Clinton, expecting voters to "transfer" their negative perception of Clinton to Bowles.

The advertising industry often attempts to transfer the authority of science and medicine in making product claims, asking consumers to purchase certain brands because of their association with the latest techniques in science or medicine.

4. The *bandwagon* approach is one in which audiences are encouraged to adopt a certain behavior because "everyone else is doing it" and they "do not want to be left behind."

5. The *plain folks* approach suggests that audiences should adopt an idea because it comes from someone similar to them or reject an idea because it comes from someone unlike them.

6. *Testimonials* are appeals from influential celebrities or authority figures whose expertise may be irrelevant to the product being sold or idea being promoted. A common example is the use of professional athletes to endorse companies or products, including those that are unrelated to the sport for which they are known.

7. *Card Stacking* is a method that stacks the cards in favor of the desired result, presenting one-sided evidence or half-truths. For example, critics of a university's athletic program may point out the graduation rate for the school's athletes is only 45 percent (and therefore the athletic program should be eliminated), but not mentioning (or perhaps not knowing) that the graduation rate for nonathletes is only 42 percent.

The use of *fear or scare tactics* as devices to influence behavior is common in advertising and political campaigns. A communicator using this tactic typically pairs a negative result with the desired behavior required to avoid it. Examples include television commercials showing an accident scene, followed by the suggestion of wearing seat belts, or the scene of a house fire, followed by a pitch for smoke detectors.

8. *Euphemisms* are terms intended to obscure or soften the true meaning of behaviors or concepts. Examples include a company referring to employee layoffs as "early retirement opportunities" or the government referring to a tax increase as a "revenue adjustment."

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEGITIMATE PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGNS

There are three characteristics found in legitimate public relations campaigns. The first is that of *free choice,* meaning the audiences are able to choose freely among several actions: Adopt the ideas or behaviors being advocated by campaign organizers, adopt the ideas or behaviors of another party involved in the issue, remain committed to their previously held ideas or behaviors, or not take part in the issue at all. Free choice also means there is no coercion involved. Campaign organizers are allowed to be assertive in their work, of course, but in an ethical communications campaign, the final choice must be up to members of the audience.

The second characteristic is *mutual benefit,* meaning that both the communicator and the audience must emerge from the transaction with some benefit. A campaign in which only the communicator benefits is manipulation rather than true public relations.

The third characteristic of a legitimate public relations campaign is that it takes a *multidisciplinary approach.* Instead of dealing only with the mass media, an approach typically used in advertising true public relations campaigns may also apply theories and techniques from fields such as psychology, sociology, and education. For example, a company trying to sell cat litter may find success with traditional advertising and marketing techniques. However, an organization attempting to promote the importance of spaying or neutering cats will have to apply a variety of other communication techniques to be successful.

TYPES OF PERSUASIVE CAMPAIGNS

Persuasive campaigns are used either to resolve problems or to take advantage of opportunities. They can be placed into five categories: political, commercial, reputation, educational, or social action.

The category of **political campaigns** can be subdivided into those that are *candidate oriented* and *issue oriented.* Candidate-oriented campaigns are usually orchestrated by campaign managers and other professionals who use techniques other than those used by public relations professionals. Those techniques include scare tactics, deception, exaggeration, and other forms of communication commonly referred to as *spin.* Because we (and many other public relations professionals) prefer that such tactics not be confused with those used in the public relations profession, candidate-oriented campaigns will not be discussed here.

The tactics used in issue-oriented campaigns, although not completely free of "spin," are generally conducted on a higher ethical plane than those that are candidate oriented. Issue-oriented campaigns are often aimed at attempting to get a proposed governmental action passed or defeated. It could be at the federal, state, or local level. Examples of issue-oriented campaigns at the federal level include those that resulted in the passage of the Brady Bill (handgun control act), the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act, and the North American Free Trade Agreement. Recent examples of issue-oriented persuasive campaigns at the state level include those involving the spread of legalized gambling, changes to a state's workers' compensation laws, or an increase in the state's sales tax. At the local level, city and county governments often work with private interests to pass measures that provide either for a "local option" sales tax or the public sale of bonds to fund new schools, sports stadiums, or other public works projects.

Commercial campaigns are used to promote a company's new products or services (often called *rollout campaigns*) or a new company as a whole. They may include activities usually thought of as "advertising" or "marketing," but they include public relations techniques as well.

Reputation campaigns (sometimes called *image campaigns*) are those aimed at improving how a company or nonprofit organization is perceived by its publics. Reputation campaigns are different from commercial campaigns because they do not promote specific products or services; they instead deal with the organization as a whole. They often follow a major crisis or other situations generating negative publicity, such as Tylenol's recovery from a 1982 product tampering crisis, Exxon's attempt to recover from the 1989 oil spill in Alaska, or United Way's recovery from a 1991 financial scandal. More recent examples include Firestone's campaign that accompanied the recall of defective tires and United Airlines' effort to recover from a summer of flight delays caused by bad weather, equipment problems, air traffic control patterns, and labor conflicts.

In other cases, the decline in an organization's reputation may not have resulted from a specific incident, but rather from the accumulation of factors over a long period of time. One example involves the National Rifle Association, which financed a reputation campaign in the late 1980s, after years of negative publicity—mainly caused by its opposition to gun control legislation—contributed to a decline in public perception.

Educational or public awareness campaigns are those conducted by nonprofit organizations or other advocacy groups. Many such campaigns involve medical conditions such as cancer, heart disease, and eating disorders, and attempt either to educate people of a medical condition's warning signs or to make behavioral changes. Other campaigns in this category deal with social concerns such as drunk driving, domestic violence, and child abuse.

In those cases in which the campaign is advocating a behavioral change, it often asks members of its audience to do either of two things: begin doing something they have never done before (such as examine themselves for signs of cancer) or stop doing something that they have done for a long time (such as smoking).

Social action campaigns are those that advocate a social issue or cause. They are similar to issue-oriented political campaigns and use many of the same techniques; the main difference is that they are generally long term in nature. For example, an issue-oriented campaign may be a short-term or closed-ended attempt to pass a specific gun control law, whereas a social action campaign would be a broader, open-ended campaign to continue the effort to pass additional gun control measures long after the initial victory was won (or lost).

Many campaigns fall into more than one category. One example is found in Case Study 1. Johnson & Johnson's "Campaign for Nursing's Future"—designed to enhance the reputation of the nursing profession and address the long-term nursing shortage—has elements of a reputation campaign, a public awareness campaign, and a social action campaign. Another example can be found in the debate over abortion: Advocates and opponents find themselves designing campaigns that are both issue-oriented political campaigns and social action campaigns. In fact, many amendments to the United States Constitution resulted from persuasive campaigns that were both political and social action causes, such as Amendments 18 (prohibition) and 19 (women's right to vote).

APPLYING THEORY IN DEVELOPING PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGNS

In the popular situation comedy *Cheers,* bar owner Sam Malone found himself struggling in his attempt to repair the bar's aging plumbing system.

"Does anyone here know anything about plumbing?" he asked his patrons. Mail carrier Cliff Claven, the bar's resident know-it-all, was the first to respond.

"The ancient Babylonians built an elaborate system of aqueducts . . ." he said before Sam interrupted. "No, Cliff, what I need is someone to help FIX the plumbing."

"Sorry, Sammy," Cliff replied. "I'm strictly theory on this one."

Like the characters in *Cheers*, many outside the communications field fail to fully appreciate theoretical concepts. College students typically look at the concept of "theory" as a collection of abstract concepts to be memorized for test-taking purposes, then quickly discarded. Admittedly, much of communications theory is nonsense—but much of it is not. This chapter will deal with theory not as a set of abstract concepts, but rather as valuable insights into how members of target audiences process information and make decisions.

A theory is a set of assumptions used to explain how a process works and to make predictions as to what will result from that process.

Theories are not laws or inflexible rules; they are merely guides. One example can be found in Socrates' ideas about inductive and deductive reasoning. If person X likes person Y, and person Y likes person Z, it is likely that person X will also like person Z. But it does not hold that if person X likes his dog, and his dog likes to dig for bones, that person X will also like to dig for bones.

While the theories that have survived over time, have done so because of their applicability, they are most valuable when combined with the practitioner's real-world experience in applying them.

The authors of this textbook believe it is more important to concentrate on practical applications of public relations work and give students just enough theory to provide some context. Just as architects must understand physics in order to prevent buildings from falling down, public relations professionals must understand how public opinion and persuasion works in order to be effective in their jobs.

GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT PERSUASION AND OPINION CHANGE

In their 1953 book, *Communication and Persuasion,* psychologists Carl Hovland, Irving Janis, and Harold Kelley explained a number of generalizations about persuasion and opinion change that are just as valid today as they were a half century ago. Among them were:

1. An individual's opinions are more likely to change in the desired direction if conclusions are explicitly stated than if those individuals are left to draw their own conclusions. Some people believe that if all of the facts are laid before audience members, they will make the right decisions. The weakness of that theory is that even highly intelligent audiences frequently fail to see the implications of the facts unless those implications are laid out.

2. Effects of persuasive messages tend to wear off over time. Even when persuasion is effective, the results are seldom permanent. Repetition is often necessary to drive home certain points.

3. Audience members most in need of hearing a message are least likely to hear it. Parents who show up at PTA meetings are mostly those whose children are having the least difficulty in school. Persons who could benefit from social services are the least likely ones to show up at public meetings at which those services are discussed. Promoters must therefore use a variety of communication tactics rather than just a limited number.

4. Audience members are more likely to make the desired choice if both sides of an argument are presented instead of only one side. Audiences tend to be skeptical of an individual or organization that tells them only one side of the story and expects them to accept it without questions. A more effective strategy is to explain both sides of an issue, but then explain why one side should be preferred over the other.

DECISION-MAKING MODELS

In a 1983 study, James O. Prochaska and Carlo C. DiClemente identified four stages of human decision making. While their study dealt mainly with tobacco usage, the same model could be used to study other personal behaviors, such as those related to alcohol consumption, drug use, and sexual conduct. Advertising, marketing, and public relations researchers can apply them to purchasing decisions and other consumer behaviors.

The four stages of the Prochaska and DiClemente models are precontemplation, contemplation, action, and maintenance. In some cases, a fifth stage of relapse occurs if the maintenance effort is not successful.

In the *precontemplation* stage, communicators must overcome one or both of the following problems: (1) that receivers of the message do not see the proposed behavior as relative to their needs and (2) that receivers of the message believe it is not appropriate or necessary for someone like them. Examples include a television viewer who sees a commercial for computers, cellular telephones, or other technology products, and comments that "I can't imagine any circumstances under which I would ever use one."

At the *contemplation* stage, members of the audience weigh the advantages and disadvantages (or benefits and risks) of the product, service, or behavior being suggested.

In order to get audience members to move from the contemplation stage to the *action* stage, communicators must emphasize the benefits and minimize any perception of drawbacks.

The *maintenance* stage is where many communication campaigns fall apart. Audience members may purchase a product, subscribe to a service, or adopt a new behavior; but unless such decisions are reinforced, the natural tendency is to discontinue the use of a product or service and relapse into old choices or behaviors if the rewards of doing so outweigh the rewards associated with the new behavior that are not sufficient.

THEORIES FROM MASS COMMUNICATION

Because public relations courses are often offered through academic departments labeled as "mass communications," they tend to emphasize theories from that discipline. Most of the theories fall into an area known as "media effects," which is the study of how the journalism and advertising industries influence personal decision making and public policy.

The Magic Bullet Theory

When communications scholars and social scientists first began studying the effects of the mass media in the 1920s, the first major theory they developed was called the "magic bullet theory." It was based on their belief that the media (both news media and entertainment media) were so powerful that they could accomplish almost anything by influencing or manipulating public opinion and social policy. Variations of the theory were also developed, and all were grouped together into a category known as **powerful effects theories**. The concern at the time was that if such theories were true, society would be at the mercy of those persons or companies who controlled the media. Even though the magic bullet theory and most other "powerful effects" theories have since been discounted, they were credible enough at the time for the federal government to establish rules to limit the size of media conglomerates and encourage competition among the media. Today, communications scholars and legal authorities generally agree that the interests of the people are best served by healthy competition among the media and the "marketplace of ideas" principle.

Cumulative Effects Theory

This theory suggests that persuasive campaigns can be most effective when the message comes from a variety of sources and/or is repeated from the same source but over an extended period of time. An example would be a broad-based effort to influence individuals to recycle their newspapers, aluminum cans, and glass and plastic bottles. A man may hear a message about recycling on the car radio while driving to work in the morning, and it may have little or no effect. But if he receives a second recycling message in an employee newsletter at work, a third when his child brings home recycling information from school, and a fourth in the form of a church bulletin the following Sunday, the accumulation of the four messages results in behavior changes.

To some extent, this theory is in opposition to the magic bullet theory. The theorist most associated with the cumulative effects theory is German social scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann.

The application of this theory in public relations work means that professional communicators cannot depend on one communication tactic alone to get their message across; they must use either a combination of multiple tactics carrying the same message, or repeat the same message through one method over an extended period of time.

Two-Step Flow of Communication

In his 1955 book titled *Personal Influence,* researcher Paul Lazarsfeld developed a theoretical model to describe how individuals are influenced to adopt or change their beliefs and behaviors. According to his model, individuals seldom make decisions based solely on their own beliefs; those decisions are influenced by other persons in their lives, such as friends, parents, work supervisors, educators, church leaders, physicians, public officials, and the media. "Two-step flow" refers to the information passing from the source to the **opinion leaders** and then on to the receivers, whether intended to take that route or not. Opinion leaders can exert their influence by speaking, writing, or modeling behavior that is copied by others. *Formal opinion leaders* are those in positions such as elected public officials, or individuals chosen to head unions, special-interest groups, or nonprofit organizations. Journalists often ask them to comment on issues in the news. *Informal opinion leaders* are those people who are not in elected or appointed positions, but are able to influence others because of personal characteristics such as charisma or assertiveness.

Opinion leaders can be male or female and are found in every racial, ethnic, social, and political group. Lazarsfeld estimated that one in every five persons is an opinion leader in some respect.

During one of Lazarsfeld's studies, he asked people who their opinion leaders were and why they listened to them. One waitress in a coffee shop described to Lazarsfeld her opinion leader as "a customer who sounded like he knew what he was talking about."

Lazarsfeld first applied this model to how voters made decisions about candidates and issues in the 1940s, and public relations professionals soon began applying it to fields other than politics. One of those practitioners was Edward Bernays, who wrote in a 1932 article that many opinion leaders are not even aware of their role and the amount of power that they have.

Today, public relations professionals use this model in other types of campaigns by first identifying target audiences for their messages and then determining whom those groups consider their opinion leaders.

The expansion of technology over the last century has changed the nature of opinion leaders. In the early 1900s, for example, opinion leaders were most likely the town bankers, retailers, clergy, union stewards, and schoolteachers. Some of those may still play that role today, but for some groups, their opinion leaders are more remote—television personalities, popular authors, newspaper columnists, national political leaders, and those expressing their opinions to large audiences via the Internet.

Typical opinion leaders in today's society typically share five characteristics.

The first is that they tend to possess a higher degree of education than people around them. The majority have attended college, and many have gone on to graduate school.

The second characteristic is that they consume more media than other individuals, and are usually more informed about current events and social trends. They tend to rely on daily newspapers more than on television for news, and when they watch television, they do so for the purposes of information rather than entertainment.

The third characteristic is that they tend to be active in politics and community affairs. The majority attend public meetings, write letters to newspaper editors and elected public officials, work for special-interest groups, and serve on the boards of community associations and non-profit organizations.

The fourth characteristic is that they are early adopters of new ideas. Within a list of friends, co-workers or other persons considered to be members of a peer group, the first individual on that list to use electronic mail, own a cellular telephone or design their own World Wide Web site, is also likely to be the group's opinion leader.

The fifth and perhaps most important characteristic is that they have the ability to influence people around them, either because of position (such as in the case of parents, employment supervisors or union stewards), or personal qualities such as charisma or assertiveness.

A variation of the two-step model is the **N-step theory**, which states that individuals seldom receive information from only one opinion leader; they are likely to turn to different opinion leaders for each issue on which they form an opinion. Health care marketers know, for example, that elderly patients treat their doctors and pharmacists as opinion leaders on medical issues, and they direct their marketing efforts accordingly. But those same elderly patients are likely to select a trusted public official for information on political issues, and an educated son or daughter for information on social issues.

Agenda-Setting

First described in a 1973 study by University of North Carolina professors Max McCombs and Donald Shaw, the agenda-setting theory suggests that the media—either purposely or not—set the agenda for public debate and discussion.

If applied to public relations practice, the theory would place more emphasis on the media as opinion leaders and active participants in the persuasion process. This is especially true of the newspaper editorial page—perhaps the most important part of the newspaper in terms of influencing public opinion and public policy.

The agenda-setting theory can take two forms. The passive agenda-setting theory states that influence is unintentional: the media does not tell audiences what to think, but it tells them what to think about. Most newspaper publishers are proud of the fact that they are agenda-setters. One publisher describes his newspaper's role as an agenda-setter as "keeping the community in conversation with itself."

The active agenda-setting theory states that the media do in fact tell audiences what to think. The best example of that is the newspaper editorial page, which informs readers "this is what the management of this newspaper thinks" and implies that readers should agree and act accordingly.

One recent book based on the active agenda-setting theory is titled *Mediaspeak: How Television Makes up Your Mind*. In the introduction to the book, the author writes, "We do not see the world as it is. We see it as television presents it to us."

Social Learning Theory

Sociologist Albert Bandura developed this theory that suggests that people adopt not only their opinions by modeling others, but also behaviors, especially those behaviors they see modeled for them in the media. In researching media habits of children, Bandura demonstrated that children will imitate the violent acts they see on television when they see no punishment associated with the violent behavior. Government officials recognized the validity of Bandura's work when they claimed that a relationship exists between television violence and antisocial behavior in youth.

On the adult level, when individuals observe others being rewarded for exhibiting certain behaviors, they attempt the same behaviors and expect the same rewards. Rewards can be external, such as recognition and praise, or internal, such as a feeling of self-worth or increased prestige.

Public relations professionals working in the area of employee relations have noticed that even negative behaviors will be repeated by others if they see them being rewarded. For example, if complaining about large workloads results in an individual's workloads being reduced, that behavior is likely to be exhibited by others. If employees are allowed to violate safety rules without being corrected or reprimanded, other employees are unlikely to take those rules seriously. Whether the rewards are intentional or unintentional, employers will get the behaviors they reward.

There is also a strong link between consumer behavior presented in entertainment programming, and consumer spending by real persons. In a 1998 study, for example, Harvard economist Juliet Schor, found that for each hour per week spent watching television, the household spent an additional $208 per year. Schor attributed the increase to the depiction of glamorous lifestyles on television and the audience's belief that the clothing, automobiles, and entertainment choices shown on television represented the typical American family, and because of that belief audiences increased their spending in order to "keep up."

Episodic Framing

This theory, also known as the *issue-attention cycle,* states that the media set the agenda for societal debate, but that the agenda is always changing. In short, it says that the media select a topic, pay some attention to it, and then the public follows. But after a while, the public loses interest, and the media move onto another issue. The cycle then starts all over again, with a different topic. The public's attention span dictates how long the media will pay attention to something; the media will keep something on their agenda as long as people keep reading the newspaper stories and watching the television stories.

One example of the issue-attention cycle was media coverage of famine and starvation in Ethiopia. In October 1987, American newspapers and television networks produced a series of stories about starvation in the African country, and treated the topic as if it were a new one. Both, the newspaper, and television stories, overlooked the fact that the conditions had existed for more than a decade. Later, the media lost interest in the issue and began to produce fewer and fewer stories about it until the coverage disappeared altogether. More than a decade later, famine and starvation are still widespread in Ethiopia, but few Americans were aware of it, because of the lack of media coverage.

A variation of episodic framing is *thematic framing,* which is different only because it features a "triggering event." An example of thematic framing is found in the media coverage of the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman in 1994, a crime for which O. J. Simpson was the chief suspect. As part of their coverage of the crime, both print and electronic media produced a number of "sidebars" about domestic violence. Social workers specializing in domestic violence work appreciated the attention the issue received, but questioned why it took a highly publicized murder case to call attention to the issue. They also worried that after media interest in the murder case subsided, their coverage of the domestic violence issue would decline as well, which it did.