Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
John W. Felton – 1994

In today's computerized, laser-beamed world, millions of messages are sent, but only a few are really heard and acted upon. Why?
Searching for "why" so few message are heard is what puts the mystery, the puzzle, the challenge, and the excitement in this sometimes-schizophrenic business you and I do called public relations. If our messages don't get heard, we're out of business.

Oriental cultures offer the first answers to "why." Both the Japanese and the Chinese languages are made up of pictures. Their words are actually drawings or symbols. Since many scientists believe our minds work in a series of picture snapshots, you'd think our Oriental friends would have a decided advantage, especially in written communications—provided you can learn the hundreds of symbols they use.

But they have trouble with communications too. In fact, when my wife, Ann, and I Were visiting in China two years ago, we discovered an interesting saying they have which when roughly translated says: "Talk don't cook rice" (sic).

That explains why I have a bowl of uncooked rice and chopsticks in front of me.

It's a visual, tangible way to understand that rice doesn't cook all by itself, that it has little value or appeal as foodstuff unless it's cooked, and it's almost impossible to with chopsticks if it's uncooked. And no matter how much you talk, messages alone can't cook rice! Yes, we can discuss all the theories of cooking rice, explore all the various techniques, the different recipes, and even argue about the proper temperature, the utensils, and the seasonings, but all this talk doesn't get the rice cooked.

We all know from communication theory that it's the understandability and the acceptability of the message that helps to change, to alter, or to modify behavior.

Just as we know, cooking rice changes the rice. "Talk don't cook rice" is the Oriental way to politely say they merely saying something doesn't mean it's done. Hot air without some other action isn't believable and doesn't get the job done.

A second answer to the "why" may be found in an article called "Multimedia in Education: Arming your Kids for the Future" in the magazine PC World. In this article, the author, Donn Menn, states: "As humans we seem hard-wired for multiple input. Consider that we remember only about 10 percent of what we read, 20 percent of what we hear, 30 percent if we can see visuals related to the hearing, 50 percent if we watch someone do something and we remember 90 percent if we do it ourselves." This suggests that our messages need to offer the hearer a strong vision or reason to act upon what is heard. You and I can say we believe all kinds of things. WE can give lip service to hundreds of ideas, but if we don't help our hearer find a way to act out our communication in a believable way, we don't cook rice. If cooked rice is the communication symbol for getting something accomplished—something done—then you and I had better learn how to cook rice if we want to be effective.

A third answer to "why" our messages don't get heard is that we don't know as much about the communication as we think we do. And some of what we assume we know is wrong! It's a reminder of that wonderful old quote from Mark Twain: It's not what we know that hurts us; it's what know that ain't so!"

In fact, that's why most people have trouble with communications.

For example, we all start out at about age three using words and being able to be pretty vocal and clear about our likes and dislikes, our wants and wishes. And that's where the trouble begins!

We're left with the impression very early in life that communication is simple. It's child's play. Everyone can do it naturally like walking or talking. You know how true this is if you've ever seen young children manipulate their parents.

We also need to remember that talking isn't necessarily communicating. Those of us who learned to endure and somehow survived living with teenagers know that saying something does not necessarily mean the message gets through. We know communications involve both feeding out of words, images, facts or information and a response or feedback to show the message was received, understood and we hope, acted upon properly.

And let's stress the understood and acted upon properly part of the communication process. It's the fourth answer to "why." We can send out all kinds of messages—in face we do—but the most critical parts of the process are often ignored. That is, who received the message, how it was received, and what was the result—what response or reaction did it cause? The test is did the communication do what we wanted it to do? Did it cook rice?

In other words, it seems nearly all of us are better at the talking, the speaking, the writing, and the correspondence part of the communications than we are at the consequences or results of the communications. And I believe one public relations skill we need to learn more about is the consequence of how one attitude plays against another.
We use the excuses: "But I told them," "I don't know why they don't understand," and "It was perfectly clear to me." The problem is what was clear to us wasn't clear to them!
We need to remember that when we are communicating people need to catch the basic idea of what we saying. It's the process of painting pictures with sounds, and words, and images on other people's brains. And the clearer we can paint those pictures, the more we can get them to match up, to look alike, the better the communications will be. In his book, You've Got to Be Believed to Be Heard, Bert Decker defines these images and pictures as the "first brain response."

This means we always need to ask: "how can we turn this into pictures for the brain?" "what does this message look like to the one who is going to receive it?"

We have wonderful Space Age laser and computer technologies to help us speed the sending of the message and that's great. But it doesn't help to send it faster if the message isn't properly understood when it gets there.

So even with all the most modern of gadget, we still have to carefully craft and tailor or messages if we want them to elicit the kind of response we hope they will achieve. One of our secrets is to tune messages to the receiver's attitudes.

To explain, let me delve into my years of experience as head of public relations for a Fortune 300 corporation. When I first arrived at McCormick almost 20 years ago, I found myself not getting through to some of the older executives. So even back then I wondered "why" I wasn't being heard.

After some researching into each of their executive backgrounds and talking with them, I found out that nearly all of them either joined McCormick or came back to McCormick after World War II. They all shared many of the same experiences and they all held essentially the same set of values and attitudes. They even wore the same kinds of clothes—button-down shirts, grey flannel suits, blue-blazer jackets, striped ties, and in those days, hats! They belonged to the same Columbus, played golf together, and partied together as couples.

Most of them had also gone to school and grown up in Baltimore. They had a very clear view of their role in the company, their industry, the community, and their place in the world. And nearly all of them shared the same set of values and attitudes. They had the same attitudes they had held in the '50s even though we were then living in the '70s.

It was apparent that they reason I wasn't getting my message heard was because I was trying to communicate attitudes of the 1970 s to a group with valued and attitudes stick in the '50s. This meant we had attitudes of the '50s generation nicknamed the "Silent Generation" clashing with the attitudes of the '7-s generation nicknamed the "Dropout Generation." No wonder messages weren't getting through.

I was trying to tell a blue-blazer, gray-flannelled generation that said it believed in employee loyalty, in thrift and that Americans could do anything, about employees in the '70s. The '70s'genearation dressed in unisex clothes and leisure suits, popped "happy" pills and were disappointed and disillusioned that the protests they made in the '60s hadn't really changed the world much. These employees were saying, Why be loyal?" and "The work ethic is dead."

Nothing was wrong with my '7ps' messages. They were logical. They had emotional appeal and they were morally the right thing to do., They ad all the right elements except they were aimed at people with a '50s' attitude. That's why people with a '50' attitude. That's why they were being heard. The messages were right, but the receivers were wrong. The same way you can't get the right message on the radio if you aren't tuned into the right station.

What did I do?

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This experience in discovering differences in values and attitudes triggered my exploration of what I've called "A Generation of Attitudes."

Using a variety of social science studies and opinion research data, I spent the next few years charting employee values and attitudes in 10-year segments starting with the '50s on through the '90s.

All of us know that values and attitudes never fall into nice, neat little 10-year packages, but since the decades had already been identified and been given specific names, it was easier to develop the matrix by decades: "The Silent Generation" of the '50s, "The Protest Generation" of the '60s, "The Dropout Generation" of the '70s.

To track these attitudinal changes, I chose nine different characteristics. I'm sure a trained social scientist would have picked others, but I chose these nine because they seemed to tell me some of the things I needed to know as a communicator. They are:

• Lifestyle, clothes, appearance
• What the generation believe in or said it believed in
• The basic concept of work
How the generation felt about
• The future
• Loyalty and service
• Leisure
• Consumer Purchases
• Responsibility and
• Education

By plotting these characteristics vertically, it's possible to read horizontally across the decades to see how much attitudes have changed.

You know that children start out at birth with no concept of right or wrong. A moral code, principles, a conscience, and attitudes must be developed. We nee d no textbook reference to know that values and attitudes are formed by many factors. Among these are family, education, social status, experience, guilt, religion, friends, peers, culture, sex, physical appearance, abilities, talents, and so forth. WE also know that attitudes act as blueprints of behavior. They are a predisposition to act, to feel, and to believe in a uniform way.

Most of those who study human behavior agree that by the we reach our early 20s, all of your pre-conceived notions, prejudices, beliefs, and other credentials of our character are not only formed, but are imprinted into an overall set of values which are manifest in attitudes, and we carry this set of attitudes with us usually for the rest of our lives.

It doesn't mean we can't change.

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Our values and attitudes are never locked in forever, but they are established., these attitudes are also interrelated, usually consistent, and are not easily changed because they re part of our psychological make up. They form an integral part of our self-image. This means that any word pictures, images or messages sent to us have to play against the pre-set patterns we have established as our basic core value-attitudes. It's the pre-set pattern that helps to determine whether we are an adult with the '60s ,'70s, or '80s.

Chronological age is not always a factor. We all know people shoe age group fits the '70s, but shoe background, family, and experience have patterned them with attitudes of the '50s. And, in contrast, we probably know some people who reached maturity in the '50s who act and have the attitudes and the behavior that closely math attitude patterns of the '80s' adult.

The one constant we do know is that eh better we understand the pattern of value-attitudes people have, the better we are able to shape and send messages that they can and will receive and can and will act on. It's the old cliché. We have to "know where they are, what their attitudes are to reach them." That's how we get the chance to cook rice. The secret is targeting.

Let's be clear that we do not have to create message that agree with receiver attitudes, but we do have to create messages which are aware of receiver attitudes so that the message can play effectively for or against the receiver's pre-conceived notion or bias. One group that targets messages better than any other I know is the writers of country western music. Some of you know I've served for several years on the board of the Baltimore Symphony so you can imagine that country western isn't my favorite kind of music, but I love some of its lyrics!

See if these lyrics don't give you a clear message—one that's memorable. And see if you don't feel a set of attitudes with these lyrics:

- "Walk out backwards so I think you're comin' in. Don't wave goodbye—just wave 'hello' again."
- "My wife ran off with best friend and I miss him."
- Or "Sometimes you're the windshield and sometimes you're the bug!"
- Or "I hope you're livin' as high on the hog as the pig you turned out to be!"
- Or "I fell in the water you walked on."
- Another: "Life's a dance. You learn as you go. Sometimes you lead. Sometimes you follow. Don't worry 'bout what you don't know. Life's a dance. You learn as you go."
- Or: "If you won't leave me I'll find someone who will."
- And my favorite: Billy Ray Cyrus has a turn called "I'm so miserable without you it's almost like you're here!"

Why do we remember these messages? Because they deal with human feelings, human emotions. We also remember them because they are simple and direct, and we all know those simple, clear and direct messages are often the most difficult to create.

Please understand I'm not trying to suggest that public relations people need to become devoted fans of country western music, but I am suggesting we learn how to focus and shape our message with greater simplicity, skill and creativity. We can learn from many different sources—and even country western lyrics can be one of those sources.

Another is to take advantage of our other senses. We communicate not just by creating brain pictures with sight ad sound, but with smell and touch and taste too.
As a food company that specializes in flavors, it's natural for us to use both taste and smell to communicate.

Here is another example fro my corporate experience of what works in helping to solve communication problems. Because there are many other McCormicks, two years after I arrived at the company we found a way to make our annual reports smell like one our spices. The scent sends an immediate message. There's no doubt which McCormick we ar. Your nose tells you the minute you open the report.

The first year, 1977, a friend at Hallmark Cards wrote to me. He thought the idea of an annual report that smelled like cinnamon for a spice company was sensational. He said he left his company on the coffee table and the dog ate it! He said "P.S., will it hurt the dog?" We him "no." But we were amused at the unintended consequences of our communications with smell.
Another that first year was a call from a friend at Merrill Lynch in New York. He said, "Felton goddamit! We can't get any work done here today. Everybody's sniffin' your annual report!"
We've been spicing up our annual reports every year since then, but we always keep the scent a secret. Local printing houses complain that their employees usually gain about 10 pounds because the scent of the printing shop day after day makes them so hungry they have to send out for food constantly.

The business section of the Baltimore Sun runs a pool each year. The first to guess the scent of our annual report gets the pot.

All these are unintended consequences of communications meant to send the message that we're the McCormick that's the world leader in spices, seasonings, and flavors. With all we've talked about earlier as background, now let's look at what we found out in charting changes in employee attitudes decade to decade. Let's start with the '50s and go down our nine characteristics.

The '50s—"The Quiet Generation"

• Dress: Button-down shirt, striped tie, grey flannel suit, blue blazer jacket, white buck shoes, ladies' hats and white gloves.
• Beliefs: This generation believed in institutions/organizations, church, marriage, military service, government, strict codes and rules of behavior.
• Work: The central meaning to work was career/success oriented.

• Future: The '50s said for the future the sky is the limit. And we're confident we as American can do anything!
• Loyalty: Employees were loyal; they believed in service to company and worked for rights/privileges.
• Leisure: Spent time trying to "look good." They believed leisure was a privilege, not a right.
• Consumers: The '50s thought thrift was smart. If you want something, save to buy it. Pay cash. Practice self-denial.
• Responsibility: Their individual responsibility was achieved through increased effort. You blame yourself for results. Initiative and hard work paid off.
• Education: The '50s thought education, computes and technology would lead us to the American dream. Unlimited progress. Unlimited resources. The young generation should be taught by elders what is right.

The '60s—"The Protest Generation"

• Dress: Blue jeans, bears, long hair. The decade of the teenager. Rock 'n' roll and Elvis.
• The '60s believed in "rights," in participation, in society, and in protest for change. Thought government action could change things.
• Purpose of work in the '60s was to help change society—make it socially responsible.
• They felt future is OK, but we want it now. Sought instant gratification. Cradle-to-grace security was taken for granted.
• '60s' adults believed in service to social justice. "Rights are rights." Sought equal employment opportunities.
• Time was used for protests, sit-ins, marches. Most held unrealistic expectations.
• Consumers in the '60s wanted instant pleasure. Take it now. Charge it.
• Responsibility meant group action to demand "stolen" rights and privileges. Blame the system. It's wrong.
• Education isn't equal, so let's fix it. And in the '60s we began to realize technology and computers put people out of work.

The '70s—"The Dropout Generation"

• Unisex clothes, leisure suits, pills, drugs, price of oil skyrocketed.
• Adults of the '70s were disappointed, disillusioned, lost the trust in change. Protest didn't change that much. They felt cheated. Government change didn't change much.
• Purpose of work was to have personal significance and security. "A place to be." Women began to seek new roles and redefine the workplace.
• Future for the '70s: That's tomorrow, who cares? Promises of the past are now in the question.
• Employees lost believe in service. Why be loyal? Why should I serve? The work ethic is dead.
• Time was taken up with special personal interests. We had less volunteerism. Both mom and dad worked.
• Things don't work. Nothin' works, so why fix it? "The fix needs fixing." They used drug language.
• Every solution brings a new set of problems. So let's blame the problems.

• Education: Computers and technology aren't the panaceas we thought. They don't solve all the problems promised to solve.

The '80s—"The Me Generation"

• Clothing was individual styles. No real dress code. Most preoccupied with physical fitness and greed. Mergers and acquisitions abounded.
• Adult attitude of the '80s no longer believed in much of anything but self. Had serious doubts about self. People were lonely. Had realization only thing we can change is ourselves.
• '80s' attitude at work was "what's in it for me?" "Nobody knows better than me what's best for me."
• Future is for me what's mine. Spend now—fast—or inflation will eat it all up anyway. Dual incomes changed family spending.
• Not service to others, but—hey—serve me!
• Leisure is my right. Time is my choice. Start of flextime. Individuality and trade-offs became more delicate.
• '80s were cynical, selfish. "Things no longer please me."
• Blame someone else! Not me! Someone else is responsible for this mess. It's not my fault!
• In education: Don't teach me what I don't want to know. Just make me comfortable. I'll get what I want and what I need even with limited resources.

The '90s—"The Change Generation"

• The "grunge" look in clothes. But the conservative "preppy" '50s' look is also back, but not with '50s' attitudes! Tomorrow won't look like yesterday. There's a new global outlook.
• I believe "I'm OK, but we're not." The important realities are danger, crime in the streets, and change.
• Attitude at work in the '90s is "I don't give away my loyalty for free, you have to earn it." Employee expectations escalate. Health care is an issue.
• Future is not "sour grapes," but "sweet lemons." Less is more. More limited lifestyles, smaller cars, smaller houses. Environmentalism is a theme. Trade-offs are OK to get cleaner air.
• Behavior is best form of communication. "If you mean what you say, show it!" There's a gap between promise and performance.
• "We strongly need to satisfy the hunger for new experiences." Leisure is used to seek self-fulfillment and place. Wellness is an issue.
• TV has made us a "switched-off" society. The receiver now controls the message.
• This the '90s. Things ain't ever gonna be the same!" No one's to blame
• Younger generation should be taught to think for themselves even though they may do something that elders disapprove.

Now, after that vertical view and to get an idea of how attitudes have changed decade by decade, let's read horizontally across some of the categories.
We'll skip clothes, but clothing often gives us strong clues about attitudes.

Look at item two—belief. See how it changes from the '50s' strong belief in institutions, the church, marriage, military service, government, strict codes and rules of behavior to a believe in the "rights" by the '60s and a need for protest to get government to change things.

By the '70s there is disappointment, disillusion, and loss of faith because things didn't change much even with all the shouting and protests.

By the '80s there's a belief in not much of anything except maybe greed. People begin to discover all they can really change is themselves and there are doubts about that.

By the '90s there's not much left to believe, but the realities of danger, crime in the streets and change.

Look at what happens on line five—loyalty. In the '50s employees freely gave away their loyalty to the organizations they worked for.

"The Protest Generation" of the '60s believed in social justice. "Rights are rights."

By the '70s we'd lost belief in service to organization so we said, "Why be loyal?"

We turned loyalty completely around by the '80s to say, "Hey company, serve me!"

Today employees are telling organizations that behavior is the best form of communication. "If you mean what you say show it." Cook rice! Performance and promise don't match.
Using this chart you can trace similar patterns across each of the decades for each of the nine characteristics.

I haven't tried to profile the next generation, the so-called "X Generation." I don't think we know how that looks yet.

When I presented this chart to my management, they began to understand how out of tune they were with employees who had attitudes generations apart and how their own attitudes differed from various employee attitudes.

It helped them to understand why the messages they had been sending and wanted me to help them send weren't working. They were trying to communicate across generational gaps of attitudes. The chart put a shock of reality into the communication process and helped them to understand what I meant when I talked about tailoring messages to fit the perceptions and attitudes of receivers.

In the '70s before many other corporations were doing it, we started an in-house television show for employees. The format was similar to the evening news where two anchors told employees what was happening at McCormick around the world. We geared the message to the '70s love for

change. In the '80s we shaped the messages to match that generation's selfish need to know "what's in this for me?"

We all know that a '50s message about loyalty that worked well with employees in the '50s would seem like a statement from the Dark Ages to most employees today. They simply wouldn't get it. We also know change is difficult, especially in communications.

Most of us know many successful executives who keep repeating over and over the techniques and strategies that made them a success and got them to the top.
They're loyal to the techniques that worked for them in the past. But you and I know you can't drive down today's information highway by only looking in the rearview mirror!
It's amusing to me that so many top executives who are so sensitive to all the other dramatic changes happening around them are so insensitive to the need to change communication strategies and techniques to be in tune with the attitudes of their employees.

I believe it's our role as public relations professionals to be the catalysts that trigger a new sensitivity in communications. Catalysts in shaping the message to appeal to the attitude of the receiver. Its sounds simple, but it isn't.

If we can learn to do it, we will answer on e the biggest "whys" in sending, hearing, receiving, and acting out messages effectively.

The need for more effective message sending is obvious. Why do you supposed nearly all the best MBA programs now require at least one course in communications?

It's because most top executives are terrific with facts and figures and spread sheets, but most are poor communicators. Yet, it's estimated that most top executives spend 80 percent of their time doing some form of communication.

What an opportunity that offers public relations professionals who are willing to take the time to teach others in the executive suite how to shape messages that get heard, that get understood, and that get acted upon properly! In other words, the kind of messages that cook rice.

Let me close with a story because I believe that part of our heritage in public relations is to function as the storytellers did in earlier generations. Storytellers were the keeps of the culture, the customs, the folklore. Only today we call them keepers of the archives and the corporate or organizational history.

Long before we had written words, people learned their history, developed their attitudes, their beliefs, and determined their actions by listening to the great storytellers of the tribe.
One of the great storytellers of today is Fred Friendly, the revered former head of CBS-TV. We gave him an award two years ago from the National Press Foundation. In his acceptance speech, Fred talked about changes in journalism through the years and sounded alarms about some of the unfair,

bitter, biased, one-sided news reported being down today. He went on to criticize modern reporters for not even getting some of the basic facts of a story right.

To illustrate his point about the responsibility to report both sides of a story—both the bad and the good so there was a balance—Fred used the well-known story of Little Red Riding Hood, and he told the story from the point of view of the wolf!

It was not his intent to say the wolf side of the story was right, but to illustrate that wolves like saints and sinners have a right to be heard in a democracy like ours. I'd like to use the story a different way to get you to think of the attitude of the wolf.

Here's the wolf's side of the story:
"Bet you've heard the story of Little Red Riding Hood lots of times, but bet you never heard my side of the story, my attitude, and how I feel about the story.

There I was sittin' on a tree stump and Little Red comes sashaying by. She throws me a sexy look and says, 'Hi Big Boy, want to go for a while me to Granny's place?'

I didn't know where Granny's place was, but the invited sounded good to me and so did the sight of the big basket of food she was carrying.

Being a gentleman, I naturally offered to carry the basket thinking we'd only be walkin' a couple of blocks, but instead we walked in the woods, a long way into the woods—so long I'm getting tire of toting this big basket for Little Red. It was getting heavy!

In fact, I'm beginning to feel a little used.

Finally, we arrive at Granny's place. Little Red knocks and yells out, 'It's your granddaughter, sweet Little Red.'

Granny yells, 'Come on in honey. I'm in the kitchen backing cookies and will be with in a minute. Help yourself to cookies there on the table.' So I take a seat and I'm just crunching down on one of the cookies when Granny come sin. Well, she takes on look at me and starts yelling and screaming her head off. 'Wolf! Wolf!'

Red tried to calm her down, but I spot this woodcutter with a big axe outside and I skip out the window fast.

When I got o my house the family asked how my day had been. I told them, 'About the same as usual. I got accused of something I didn't do again today. You know its tough being a wolf.'
By the way, thanks for hearing my side of the story. I'm off on a weekend trip with the three pigs. Hope they're more civilized."

Whether you believe him or not, do you see how hearing the wolf's side of the story affects your own attitude and causes you to at least think about how the wolf might feel?

I believe we need to bring this kind of creative thinking to the table when we start to talk about how we get people to hear our messages or at least listen to our side of the story when considering an action or a decision.

We will never answer all the "whys" about why people don't hear and act on the messages we send. But we can greatly improve the receptability and the understanding of our messages if we can learn to be creative, to tailor, and to target what we say so the receiver will act on our messages and not merely tune us in and tune us out.

In other words, we're never going to get better at cookin' rice in our communicating process until we at least begin to get better at considering what the wolf's side of the story is and what his attitude might be.