

Campaign Strategy Newsletter No 36, 21 November: Be Interesting - Or Be Ignored

Sometimes the most basic lessons of campaign design are the most important. Working with Elaine Lawrence I recently completed a review of a major Friends of the Earth campaign - 'The Big Ask' - to help Friends of the Earth Ltd (England and Wales) 'learn the lessons' about effectiveness, political impact, value for money and so on. As usual we did a lot of internal and external interviews and I'm sure he won't mind me saying, that one of the most pertinent comments came from journalist Mike McCarthy, Environment Editor of UK newspaper The Independent.

"Being interesting is very effective. Don't be boring. Many environment groups in trying to win media interest, focus on the important rather than the interesting. There is a massive difference for the media. This campaign made something important interesting. What was 'The Big Ask' actually about? It took a frankly rather dull and complex public policy process about mandatory targets and made the legislative process interesting. It would have been very easy to make it boring."

The Big Ask was certainly effective. It mobilised tens of thousands of individuals and hundreds of Friends of the Earth groups in England and Wales to lobby almost every MP, to support moves for a Climate Change Bill requiring the government to set targets for progressive reductions in CO2 emissions. By a combination of energetic execution, good fortune in political circumstance and other factors, which I hope Friends of the Earth will agree I can write more about in another newsletter, it resulted in the government reversing its opposition and adopting the idea in the recent Queens Speech. It will become law. (See <http://www.thebigask.com/>). BBC correspondent Nick Robinson said:

"People often say 'does anything change politics? Well it has here. Friends of the Earth did a rising campaign for a Climate Change Bill. Ministers pooh-poohed the idea. What is the point of a Bill they said? It wouldn't be worth the paper it is written on. Then David Cameron adopted it as his key theme. Menzies Campbell's first big policy announcement was on green taxes and Ministers have gradually said ' Oh lets have a Bill'."

But what was the interesting bit ? It was the ask itself. What was The Big Ask ? As Mike McCarthy points out, the ask was politics and policy - inherently dull stuff. But by creating a brand for the campaign that did not even appear to be Friends of the Earth unless you looked closely, using rock music figureheads such as Thom Yorke of Radiohead and giving it personality and style which was younger, cheekier and more expressive than the Friends of the Earth brand, the campaign took the organisation into new social and psychological territory, reaching new types of supporter and energizing old ones.

The advertising agency CHI helped create the idea of The Big Ask - which in communications terms was effectively a 'dangle', a tease which dangled in front of the viewer, reader or listener inviting you in to find out what it was about.

Media trainers teach interviewees to use ABC bridging - I've posted a new extract from my book *How To Win Campaigns* at my website which gives you the basics (www.campaignstrategy.org/book_extracts/7_bridging.pdf). ABC bridging enables you to get across your 'C' communication points without getting diverted onto a journalists agenda of something more interesting, an ever present risk which is of course greater,

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the less interesting you are. Advanced training also covers "D" - the dangle. Expert interviewees can start an entire new conversation by judiciously inserting a 'dangle' that the interviewer can't resist, something which sounds so good that the listeners or viewers would be 'robbed' if they didn't give it time. Here CHI and Friends of the Earth had created a D right up front in their campaign title.

I frequently get asked to give advice on 'communications strategies'. Very often the organisation has already been debating the need for 'avoiding mixed messages' and getting 'key messages across'. Frequently they have a long list, or a huge matrix of 'messages', audiences and channels. Equally often this is unrealistic and unmanageable - simply too much stuff to ever hope to communicate with the resources available. My advice is almost always the same: forget about trying to communicate all that, or at least planning to do so. Instead work out the one or two things that would make a real difference, and add value to your work, and do those really well, with research, planning and adequate resourcing. Let the rest take care of itself - the real risk is not confusing anyone or getting details wrong but being ignored. Think about how much communication effort there is, and how little of it has any affect on you. It's the fate of 99% of communications efforts that they are simply ignored.

So being interesting is vital, if not enough in itself.

Speeding

Here's two approaches to road-safety campaigns to reduce speeding. One is by the Danish Road Safety Council and features people reinforcing the 'message' by taking the signs to the cars <http://www.speedbandits.dk/> and the other (see right) from my local patch in North Norfolk UK, where the Norfolk Police are recruiting volunteers to assist in setting up trial speed traps (they are trained to use radar guns). The Danish example has appeared on thousands of websites around the world and received wide media coverage - at least it's interesting and, as the film shows, got driver's attention.



Cheating

Following the long tradition of spoofs, the website based campaign Cheat Neutral www.cheatneutral.com cleverly transposes the morality of carbon-offsetting, to personal relationships: ie you pay for others to remain faithful so you can cheat on a partner and still keep the total amount of infidelity in the world constant. The campaign's amusing Youtube video [4] shows its success in raising the issue in political and media circles but also the limitations if one actually tried to use this 'argument' to stop people carbon-offsetting on a 1:1 basis or in a wide 'behaviour change' campaign.

Psychologically, in Value Modes terms [5], the double-take probably works to stimulate a 'rethink' amongst Pioneers but the Prospectors who want an instant pain-free positive result might be switched off, not just from offsetting but from carbon-reduction per se, unless immediately offered something better. Watch the BBC interview with Gavin Essler who gives a perfect 'Now Person' summary of assumed public motivation. In strategy terms of course you could try to get the Pioneers to stop offsetting and start doing something else better but that better thing would need to be instant, easy,

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preferably fun and signifying success (not giving things up), for it to spread beyond the Pioneers. As discussed in previous newsletters this could be a product, eg “don’t offset, get a Wattson”.

Some of the US talk-radio stations who took Cheat Neutral seriously were Brave New World type strident moralists, out to condemn them, which illustrates another pitfall of cross-psychological communications. So Cheat Neutral works brilliantly for challenging the politics of carbon-offsetting but probably only for Pioneers, and is unlikely to work if applied to ‘behaviour change’ campaigns aimed at the 60% of the ‘public’ who are Settlers or Prospectors

The campaign’s strapline is “helping you because you can’t help yourself” but the problem for behaviour-changers is that while Pioneers think they can help themselves, many of the rest of the population think they can’t.

Protest ? A New Word Needed ?

A few days ago London finally got its long awaited new connection to high speed rail in Europe, the Eurostar link to St Pancras Railway Station. Eurostar, a supporter of the Friends of the Earth Big Ask campaign (them again), rather cleverly invited a shedload of green bloggers out on the wi-fi’d carbon-neutral first trip, resulting in wide outreach to one segment of its most likely customers (see Bonnie Alter’s report in Treehugger[1]), even if the old ‘mainstream’ media focused mainly on the formal opening by the Queen and so forth.

Meanwhile outside Greenpeace hung a banner on St Pancras reading simply “YES”. Or rather it would have been better if it just read ‘YES’ (see photo at [2]) but Greenpeace felt it had to add “PS Gordon, No Need For That Third Runway”. Gordon Brown is of course the UK Prime Minister and the government is backing a climate-busting expansion of airports, including another runway for Heathrow. The government encourages rail use to cut climate emissions and more air travel, claiming there is no contradiction. I’d be surprised if anyone in the country believes them. So why did Greenpeace feel the need to lose the elegance of “YES” (possibly itself a momentary ‘dangle’) and state the plodding obvious ?

There’s a cost to stating the obvious - it tells you what to think. Drawing your own conclusion, that the government ought to be doing more of this and not runways, is more likely to make someone angry. The banner just says what Greenpeace thinks.

Having been involved in too many banner discussions myself I can imagine why they did it. It’s the fear of misrepresentation. Just saying ‘yes’ could be taken as agreeing with the government’s line - by anyone, interviewer or Minister for example, who found it a convenient point to score or muddy the water with. Underlying this is the way a banner hanging is reported or seen, as a ‘protest’. A ‘protest’ is usually taken as a manifestation of dissent: it has to be against something. So Greenpeace complied by putting in the giant footnote of what it was against.

By hanging a banner Greenpeace could both gain media attention and was trapped in the protest frame. There isn’t a word for a positive protest - could it be a ‘Proprotest’ ? We need one because without it, almost any form of public manifestation by campaigners gets put down as a protest even if it’s for something. In the public mind, and especially once filtered by media or political comment, this keeps NGOs defined as

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being "against everything". Talk to 'insiders' around UK politics at the moment and they'll tell you this is "the problem with the NGOs" on climate: "they're not for anything". This matters because however disingenuous or misplaced such statements may be, they serve as justifiers for then not doing what the campaigners want.

Academics are some of those who help sustain this frame of campaigns or environmental campaigns being 'just protest'. For example "Environmental Protest in Western Europe" by Christopher Rootes [3] charts the history of environmentalism in the eighties and nineties almost entirely by tracking 'protest' stories in the press (in the case of the UK, just in The Guardian). Although many of those campaigns were for things not just against them, it all goes down as 'protest'. We do need a new word, because categories define the story.

Campaign of the Month

The US-based Oil Change group <http://priceofoil.org/> has a clever strategy in focusing on the separation of oil and state – clever in that it plays an accepted frame (politicians are supposed to act in the interest of voters) against a climate reality (oil influence) at a point (run up to elections) where this counts.

Small Doom Film Wins Award

A nuclear war doom campaign movie made on a shoestring budget has won an award - see www.comeclean.org.uk for the film Anthropology 101 which recently received the 'Best Short Environmental Protection Documentary' award at the Artivist Festival in Hollywood. Made for the Beyond Trident Group. Will be showing in the Artivist Festival - www.artivists.org - coming to London 7th - 9th December. An example of how a very small group can use film making to gain wider interest in a subject that mostly "too awful to think about". Takes 'Inconvenient Truth' a few steps on.

[1] http://www.treehugger.com/files/2007/11/eurostars_inaug.php

[2] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/7093730.stm

[3] Oxford University Press 2003

[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3_CYdYDDpk

[5] See Using Value Modes at www.campaignstrategy.org

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