

## **Health Care Meets Reality TV: Communicating in a World of Rat-Filled Vats and Donald Trump**

Be honest now: How many of you would climb into a vat full of rats, for the possibility of a million dollars?

No one? How about if you knew that getting bitten would automatically move you on to the next level?

No? Okay, how many of you, however guilty you felt, have actually watched Fear Factor, or Survivor or another reality TV show?

Well, now that we've established that we in this room are not on the cutting edge of TV viewing, let's talk about hot topics in health care. (And we will find our way back to reality TV!)

A hot topic in health care that I believe gets way too little attention is this:

What are we missing in the ways we communicate about our health care system?

Why do I think there's something missing?

Because in the more than 30 years that I've been watching public opinion polls, and paying attention to other indicators, I'd bet there hasn't been a year when health issues didn't show up as one of the top three to five topics on Americans' minds.

Yet in a 20-year review of its polls tracking American attitudes about our health care system, the Harris Poll has found that the point when Americans were least negative

about that critical system was in 1987. Let me say that an opposite and more clear way: A large group of Americans, usually a large majority, have thought for 20 years that the American health care system is broken—and have been saying so, with little or no effect, as far as they can see. Harris expects that dissatisfaction to continue to increase because of issues like ever-rising co-pays and drug costs and growing numbers of uninsured Americans.

And, who are these Americans who are so negative about the system? Every group that Harris surveyed: physicians, employers, health plan managers, hospital managers and the general public.

When this review was done in 2002, employers were more hostile toward the system than they were in any previous surveys. So were health plan managers. Physicians' attitudes were more negative than they were at any time between 1984 and 1997. And of the general public, only 17% in 2002 thought that "the system works pretty well and only minor changes are necessary." Almost twice as many (31%) thought we need to "completely rebuild the system" and the rest (49%) said "fundamental changes are needed."

I'm sure I'm not telling you anything brand new to you, but I wanted to set the stage for these critical questions: How in the world do we communicate about health care in the face of such negative perceptions? How do we communicate in ways that educate and engage people, so that consensus can be built around a system that works? And how do we persuade people to believe in that system as we build it?

Communication was a core element in that set of questions I just asked.

As another piece of the stage setting, let's consider for a minute how communication has changed.

In that same 20 years when Americans have become very negative about the health care system, they've also become very cynical about the traditional channels of communication.

A new Gallup Poll, reported at the end of September, found the news media's credibility has declined significantly, with just 44% of Americans expressing confidence in the media's ability to report news stories accurately and fairly. This is a significant drop from last year at this time and reflects the lowest level of confidence in the media since Gallup first asked the question in 1972.

Within this increasingly negative landscape, local TV news continues to be the most popular medium, but regular viewership is still below levels recorded in the mid-1990s. Reported levels of regular newspaper reading, and viewing of network evening news broadcasts, have not recovered from their decade-long slump, though they have not declined further.

With most other media trends flat, the steady growth in the audience for online news stands out. Internet news, once largely the province of young, white males, now attracts a growing number of minorities. The percentage of African Americans who regularly go online for news has grown by about half over the past four years (16% to 25%). More generally, the Internet population has broadened to include more older Americans. Nearly two-thirds of Americans in their 50s and early 60s (64%) say they go online, up from 45% in 2000.

Interestingly, for the first time I remember in 30 years of paying attention to media usage and credibility, both are breaking strongly along partisan lines. From 1996 to 2002, CNN was viewed as the most believable broadcast or cable outlet, but its ratings have fallen gradually over time, mainly because Republicans have shifted to Fox. 35% of Republicans prefer Fox, while 28% of Democrats prefer CNN. Less than 20% of Democrats prefer each of the three traditional broadcast organizations—ABC, CBS and NBC—while only 15% or less of Republicans go to each of those outlets. (If anyone is interested in more details on this, you can find it on the Pew Research Center website.)

Now, we're getting back to the rat-filled vats and Donald Trump. Reality TV appears to be a waning fad, although there still are 40 shows listed on one website that tracks such things. The critics who watch what TV is doing minute by minute say that phenomenon is losing steam. However, before it, thankfully, goes away, I think it's instructive to look at some analysis of why it struck such a chord in so many Americans.

Although our understanding of this phenomenon has not yet undergone extensive analysis, some indications are emerging. It appears that much of the basis of the appeal of these shows is a reaction to the perceived "scripting" of everything in American culture. There appears to be a growing need for people to feel they are seeing real people, people like themselves, in real situations that, like life, are unpredictable, where the outcome depends on the skill, cleverness, and, yes, sometimes guile, of individuals. And, where even those who don't win the big prize often gain instant financial security and fame. The fact that these "reality" shows are far from real shouldn't distract us from

gaining some understanding from them of the new needs they appear to answer for many Americans.

So, we acknowledge we are in a world that is more unpredictable, and have a citizenry that feels more negative about many issues, and overwhelmed by others, and is generally more impatient and more demanding that someone pay attention to their “real” issues and wishes.

Perhaps we can assume that we have a citizenry that is more skeptical of “scripted” communication, that needs a fair amount of stimulus to get involved in anything beyond their individual lives and that perhaps has more of a view of themselves as engaged in individual battle against daunting odds.

So I will pose again that a critical question for a forum like this is: How in the world do we communicate about health care in ways that educate and engage people, so that consensus can be built around a system that works—and that people believe in?

Well—in the communications aspects of that question, we do have some models for what works. What I’m going to tell you isn’t new—these are tried and true techniques that have sold zillions of boxes of Proctor & Gamble laundry soap, zillions of cans of Coca-Cola, zillions of McDonald’s burgers. Product companies have refined these communication techniques to the point that they can slice and dice their customers to reach the exact group that will gain them one more portion of a point of market share. But more than that, they have learned to talk with their customers in ways that engender enormous loyalty and positive image. People believe in those companies—believe in their integrity, will try

their new products without much prodding, believe they are good corporate citizens and should be supported.

We who deal in ideas, and social systems, and policy issues and community needs don't seem to be willing to learn the communications techniques (or apply them consistently) in a deep and broad enough way to be as effective as the people who sell products.

So here are some thoughts about four of the most important communications techniques:

### **Understand the customer.**

Most people engaged in government, education and non-profits are uncomfortable when I talk about customers. But, make no mistake, the companies I mentioned earlier and others have fostered a customer mentality in Americans that pervades every aspect of our lives. Americans expect the groups we do business with to know us well enough and to care enough to cater to our interests and needs. We now behave like customers whether we're engaging with the school district around how our children's school schedule will fit with family vacation or with the bank about wanting to be able to access our money in the middle of the night from our computer or with a non-profit agency about wanting to volunteer for them but wanting our volunteer service to fit our retirement travel plans.

If we want to understand Americans and how to move them to different behavior or to gain their acceptance of new ideas, we have to understand the customer orientation. We don't always access the information that's out there that tells us what people are thinking and how they want to be treated. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Here are a few paragraphs from a book on American attitudes—listen closely:

Americans want a less activist government, but still believe government has some responsibility to help the poor and make sure people can pay for medical care.

Now, someone who wasn't listening closely to the nuances, or who wanted to distort that information could say:

“Americans believe government has responsibility to help the poor and make sure people can pay for medical care” and leave out the opening phrase about wanting a less activist government. Or someone could say, “Americans want a less activist government” and leave out the rest of the sentence about wanting that government to help the poorest among us have health care. Someone who was truly listening and truly trying to understand the customer would say, “Americans want both these things and we have to find a way to create a system that strikes that balance.”

Another example:

While the Congress in the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) intended to make food labels more useful and informative for consumers, lawmakers apparently were not aware that how such information is presented strongly affects whether people understand and believe it.

The Journal of Consumer Affairs reported in 2003 about a controlled study that was set up to understand why consumers don't always comprehend nutrition information and what would help. It turns out that using both the front and back of a package—short nutrition claims on the front, longer information on the back increased the understanding and believability of the claims.

I learned a similar lesson when I was promoting Water Pik's new sonic toothbrush in the early 80s. We put one 1-800 number on advertising materials, a different one on PR materials. Customers bought more product through the PR line and when asked why, it turned out that they didn't feel comfortable buying a new health-related product based on a 30-second TV ad or a one-page magazine ad. They wanted more detail about clinical trials, they wanted testimony from experts. With that information, Water Pik was able to direct its budget to giving customers more information, both helping the customer and increasing acceptance of the product.

Now, obviously such information about people can be used for good or ill, but ignoring the chance to learn it and use it to improve people's understanding of critical issues surely should be part of the mandate of leaders.

We are not a nation of people with black and white attitudes and beliefs—and policy makers may need in the future to be even more attuned to the nuances. I think if we understood better what people are saying about our health care system, we could craft a solution to its problems that led people to think: I feel good about that. I didn't get everything I wanted, but they respected and listened to me. The end result seems to mostly fit who I am and what I believe is right.”

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We've thought about understanding the customer. The second important communication technique is to:

**Attach to what they care about.**

When Chrysler tags its car ads, “Drive=Love,” that’s not about how much mileage the car gets or how inexpensive it is to maintain. When Downey fabric softener ads show soft cuddly Snuggle bear bouncing on a pile of clean laundry, that’s not about making the clothes smell good. Those words and images are trying to touch something much deeper in the customer—something more about living the good life and getting love. Now we all know drive doesn’t equal love except to a 16-year-old, but such ads illustrate that product companies know what touches American hearts and that that touch has to come first before minds and pocketbooks follow.

I find it sad that product companies know that better than most political leaders or community organizations—or at least how to use the knowledge more effectively.

The third critical technique is:

### **Speak their language.**

Ok, we’re back to the rats and Donald Trump. Reality shows got to a vast audience of Americans. It might not have been pretty to many of us, but they made vast numbers of people sit up and take notice. Although, as I said, we don’t know entirely what motivated this trend, indications are that:

People found something that appealed to them about watching what they considered to be real people fight their way through overwhelming situations, without an artificial, made-up “script”.

My experience as a journalist, a businesswoman and a communications consultant tells me that this is an important point that we ought to consider thoughtfully.

People overwhelmed by this vastly complicated world seem to be longing for and reaching out for things they consider genuine—things that relate to their “real” lives—and that are presented in language that has to do with the things that matter to them: how will this affect me, my family, my children, my neighborhood, my schools, how will I deal with it, how are other people like me dealing with it, who can I trust to tell me the truth and not be reading from a script.

So we have discussed understanding the customer, attaching to what they care about and speaking their language.

The final of the four important techniques is:

**Respond to the fact that the channels of communication are changing.**

I mentioned earlier that people continue to use and believe TV more than they do print media, but that their choices of broadcast companies have changed fairly dramatically. I also mentioned the Internet is growing by leaps and bounds as the information source of choice for many Americans—and that its demographic is broadening fast from young white males. Those two facts should cause all of us to stop and reexamine the channels through which we think we can reach people.

Most of my clients—businesses, government entities and non-profits—in the category called “media relations” in their communications plans typically mean: get me stories in the newspaper that I can hand out to board members or send around to people or put in a report about our

accomplishments. Get me on TV appeals to them even more, but they usually don't think that's achievable.

If you are getting the information you want to put in front of the public in one daily newspaper, or even on one broadcast channel, be aware you are reaching a limited and increasingly skewed portion of public.

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Another question: how many of you know what a "blog" is?

A blog is defined on the web as "your own personal website on which you can post your thoughts and chat with others." But here's some very interesting food for thought from Lionel Beehner, research editor of the *New York Press*.

"Once the province of rambling writers, the blog no longer plays a bit part in the news-making process. Nor is it simply a digitized version of 'Page Six'--a gossipy portal for name-dropping, muckraking, and skewering celebs. Blogs have emerged as a filter for the good, the bad, and the trendy."

Beehner said reporters find blogs are a "whole lot more fun than sifting through e-mails or press releases--especially when you're reading the words of a colleague instead of the pushy publicist."

He said a handful of bloggers even won press credentials to this summer's Republican Convention.

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When my clients want to get their message out in a certain channel, it's my job as a communications counselor to ask whether that's the right channel to accomplish the agreed upon goals.

If you don't have someone on your staff (and I know from being a Capitol reporter just how vast those staffs are NOT), you'll need to ask this question yourself as you plan and execute the communications part of your job.

What are some specific next steps I would take to try to implement these important techniques if I were a policy maker with intent to try to work on a really tough issue—like the health care system?

The first thing I would do would be to call Kathleen Beatty, dean of the Graduate School of Public Affairs at UCD, and Jim Shore, chancellor of the combined UCD, Health Sciences Center campus until his resignation is effective a year from now. I would try to form a long-term partnership with them around research that helps us more thoroughly understand what Coloradans think about the health care system, what would make them take, with us, responsibility for making it better and what “better” might look like. Using professors and graduate students to do work like this is an example of the kinds of synergies we ought to be fostering among institutions supported by taxpayer dollars.

I would use the resources of these university research systems, and the centers they have formed that work on community issues, to bring the leaders of stakeholder groups together to try and find consensus on at least a short list of proposed changes to the health care system. And, by the way, when you're trying to persuade other stakeholders toward change, they are your customers, and all the rules I talked about for communicating apply.)

Once I had a plan to bring forward, I would either identify a large corporation with a big, talented marketing department,

or assemble a group of talented marketing people from various organizations and figure out how they could help me get the message out there in the most effective ways, so that the community could engage with its leaders in a dialogue about this critically important issue.

Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper did the latter to great effect—assembling a whole group of marketers to help him figure out the audiences, message and channels to determine how citizens viewed Denver and how they want it “sold” to the world—so that we reap the benefits of increased tourism and business location here.

I was part of the team that used similar techniques when we successfully passed the ballot issue for the \$94 million campaign for the new library and renovation of 27 or 28 branch libraries. We partnered with U.S. West, who loaned us a couple of people from their marketing department to help us conduct focus groups with parents and children about what they wanted the new children’s library to be. We got a lot of good information for the design process, and a wealth of understanding of how to win the campaign, out of that effort that cost the campaign nothing.

We’ve talked about the importance of understanding the customer, attaching to what people care about, speaking their language and understanding the rapid channel changes occurring.

I’ve loaded you up with some statistics, some analysis and some of my perspective from 30-plus years in the communications business. I hope it has provoked you to think about this critical area of what you do, your communications strategies—not only in regard to health care

policy, but all of the important issues on which you represent us—your constituents and customers.

In the end, for me, it boils down to this:

**Our lives are less predictable than they once might have been; we are not a “mass market” to be treated as though we had one set of interests or values; we each do look at everything through our very individual lens and that isn’t selfish, but self-preserving.**

**I believe we deserve leaders who strive to understand us, with all our nuances, to listen to us and to engage us in weaving our collective concerns into solutions that work for all of us in our daily lives.**

**I hope there’s a million dollars in health care policy-making success waiting for all of you out there—without Donald Trump yelling “You’re fired!” and certainly without the rats!**