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Why values matter – how public relations professionals can draw on moral foundations theory



Graeme Trayner

Vice President, Brand and Communications Practice, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, 212 231 0050, United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explain why corporate public relations practitioners need to draw on the role values play in how people weigh up issues, brands, and claims—and how this knowledge can lead to more powerful and resonant communications.

Understanding the role of values in driving attitudes and behaviors is crucial for four reasons:

- 1 The new polarized, politicized, and value-driven public information environment requires corporate communicators and other public relations professionals to understand how people's identity and values hardwire their decisions and actions.
- 2 In this environment, information alone is not enough to change opinion. Facts and figures are often dismissed or are rejected when they go against people's sense of identity or existing values, making connecting to deep-seated motivations crucial.
- 3 Communicators need to explore what is in the background of people's opinions—not just the foreground. They must go beyond an over-reliance on rational responses to direct questions and an obsession with dry metrics. Mapping out rational opinions against nonconscious values unearths more textured insights and communication strategies.
- 4 The communications sector needs to play a rapid catch-up game with marketing, which grasp the role of motivation and identity in informing people's attitudes, and are pioneering more effective methods to get a rounded perspective on how we act.

Coming out of psychology, moral foundations theory, with its focus on how people's core values inform attitudes and decisions, provides a powerful analytic and interpretative framework to understand and navigate this new polarized and political environment.

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1. The politicized communication landscape

Across political and business markets, a rising emotionality is visible in electoral campaigns and discourses about business (Frayne, 2013). Candidates, business leaders, and organizations face often shrill and aggressive criticism, given “institutions are the only way society has found to enable people to cope with primitive feelings like dependence, rage, and hate” (Miller & Khaleelee, 1985).

This new environment manifests in a range of ways:

E-mail address: gtrayner@gqrr.com

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- Identity shapes political party and candidate preferences and signals tribal loyalty or common values. From the Tea Party in the US to UKIP and Podemos in Europe, deep-seated needs around status and self-respect, alongside specific economic and social justice demands (also value-laden), inform political movements.
- We see the rise of “political shopping” (Hertz, 2003), where ethical consumerism or buying products to overtly signal values and beliefs are more mainstream.
- The increased aggression in the public information environment is driven in part by changes in the media landscape. In a 24/7 news cycle with bitter competition, media outlets have to shout louder for attention, and as a result, leaders and organizations often have to deal with a “permanent acupuncture of criticism” (D’Ancona, 2013). Social media also often rewards the immediate and instinctive over the considered and balanced.
- The growing prevalence of conspiracy thinking and anti-establishment views impact businesses and organizations (Trayner, 2015). Healthy skepticism about power can morph into a never-ending desire to take on an enemy who is intent on undermining a way of life, whether the threat is immigrants, bankers, the European Union or multinational corporations.
- Organizations and leaders of all kinds find themselves pulled into “culture wars”—and are expected to have a stance on contentious social and ethical choices, particularly in the United States. Companies like Starbucks, Chick-Fil-A, and Hobby Lobby have joined or been drawn into debates on gay marriage, gun ownership, race relations and immigration.
- Tied to operating in a media landscape where brands often have to deal with highly emotional and aggressive criticism, companies find themselves drawn into “moral panics”—short, intense bursts of anger directed at institutions seen as infringing on values. These include issues like the use of data, supply chain choices, or marketing aimed at children (Cohen, 1972).

To manage this treacherous and at times toxic environment, communicators need to tap into new ways of thinking, and understand the more nuanced terrain around human motivation, values and emotions.

2. Information alone is not enough

Research in a breadth of fields shows rational arguments alone cannot sway opinions and that unconscious factors, like emotions, play a pivotal role. Communications solely based on facts and rational arguments run the following risks:

- A predominantly fact-based approach is likely to get lost in the “data smog” and barely noticed in an immensely crowded media environment; or alternatively, it can be seen as self-justifying attempts to make a case (Shenk, 1998). When the average person is bombarded by 3000 messages a day, just getting noticed is hard enough.
- Psychology shows that facts that jar against our pre-existing assumptions make us more likely to discount the new information. We double-down on our existing views. This “backfire effect” means our beliefs can get stronger in response to being challenged by new information (McRaney, 2012).
- In a similar vein, research indicates that new information is rejected when it threatens our sense of identity. New facts and figures trigger negative emotions and feelings, which then impair the comprehension and pickup of new perspectives. Indeed, efforts at persuasion fail or backfire, as “the old perspective is now burning more fiercely in the person’s consciousness” (Fradera, 2016).
- Neuroscience shows that emotions often trump rational factors when it comes to decision-making. Our emotional reactions to issues, debates, or brands often over-rule a more rational and considered perspective; our initial, intuitive response to a topic is a much more accurate read on our true feelings than a post-rationalized view on a debate.

In this environment, communicators—and the people and organizations they serve—need to realize that facts and figures are no longer enough. In order to gain attention, and then shift someone’s stance or actions, communications need to be rooted in core values and linked to a broader repertoire of emotions.

3. Why communicators need to play catch-up

Candidates and parties have dealt with this challenging environment for longer than their counterparts in business. They better understand the need to appeal to values alongside forward fact-based arguments. Al From, one of the pioneers behind the New Democrat movement in the 1980s and 1990s, argues political policies need to be an embodiment of values. Citing remarks by Tony Blair, branding means “giving the politics a clear definition, so that voters would instantly recognize the values and ideas associated with it and be able to differentiate them from those of political adversaries” (From, 2013).

As corporate leaders grapple with an increasingly hostile public environment—indeed, one that is inherently politicized—communicators need to ensure strategies, messaging and initiatives telegraph values and motivations.

However, communicators, particularly those operating in communications research, need to update their thinking to meet these demands. They must move beyond the current obsession with data analytics and widen their repertoire. Otherwise, communicators run the risk of being left behind their counterparts in marketing, who utilize more nuanced qualitative techniques.

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