



The “creative confrontation” of Herbert Schmertz: Public relations sense making and the corporate persona



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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the early 1970s, Mobil Oil’s public relations, under the direction of Herbert Schmertz, attempted to demonstrate to Americans that the company acted like a person who worked to benefit society. With an approach he called “creative confrontation,” Schmertz offered an adversarial stance toward the news media, coupled with inventive methods of supporting the arts. Creative confrontation sought the public’s support by revealing that the corporation was an entity that understood the needs of the public and worked to uphold American values like free expression and progress. This work, in examining a distinctive and sustained effort to communicate the corporate personality, offers lingering implications for how public relations, through the conveyance of the corporate persona, can more widely conceptualize and execute its sense-making role in society.

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1. Introduction

Herbert Schmertz, a former lawyer and political operative, directed, from 1970 to 1988, an aggressive ongoing Mobil Oil public relations initiative designed to demonstrate that the company had a personality that constructively spoke out on social issues. To accomplish this, Schmertz offered “creative confrontation”—a public relations effort that featured a combative media relations stance balanced against a softer, creative approach that stressed that Mobil supported societal institutions like the arts. Scholarly public relations literature has examined Mobil, but has largely omitted exploration of two important aspects of Schmertz’s approach: (1) that creative confrontation centered on imparting that Mobil was a beneficial corporate person in society, and (2) that public relations, in communicating the corporate persona, attempted to address existing societal values in order to achieve understanding and support of the organization from various publics. It is important to examine how Schmertz set out to establish the value of the corporate persona as his efforts resonate with emerging research about the sense-making role of public relations in contemporary society. In particular, recent public relations works on corporate social responsibility (CSR) touch upon how the corporate entity can work to build associations with publics through emphasizing how the corporation’s values and actions resonate with citizens’ concerns (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Kim & Choi, 2012; Mitra, 2011; St. John & Arnett, 2014; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011). In large part, these works emphasize that the corporation’s ability to make links with the larger public goes beyond how various stakeholders connect with the company through the organization’s products and services. That is, scholars note that the corporation signifies that it has an important role in society because, through its assertions and actions, it helps “give meaning, direction, and coordination to persons’ lives” (Heath, 2006, p. 87). Therefore, in examining how Schmertz used creative confrontation

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to assert the presence of the corporate persona, this work offers lingering implications for how public relations, through the conveyance of the corporate persona, can more widely conceptualize and execute its sense-making role in society.

2. Public relations and sensemaking

As part of a volume on public communication campaigns, [Dervin and Foreman-Wernet \(2013, p. 147\)](#) maintain that public relations' distinctive contribution to society is its capacity to reach individuals by showing the "lasting and viable intersections" between an institution and various constituencies. They point out, in discussing what they term "sense-making methodology" (or SMM), that audiences are most amenable to such sensemaking in times of challenge and when they perceive that the communicator is like themselves. Dervin and Foreman-Wernet's articulation of SMM aligns well with other scholars' assertions that the field's dispositions reveal a meaning-making orientation.¹ [Lerbinger \(2006\)](#) noted that public relations people customarily want to take in account the perceptual and intuitive dynamics around them, because they are anticipating audience concerns about change and how to build a sustainable, "honest and unambiguous" role for the organization within a society in flux (pp. 330–331). [Hoger and Swem \(2000\)](#) observed that public relations practitioners often are well-positioned to anticipate the role of the organization in creating and communicating "new and revised futures" (p. 429). Elaborating on the sensemaking challenges for public relations, more recently [Valentini, Kruckeberg, and Starck \(2012\)](#) pointed out that the public relations field is slowly coming to realize that relationships with particular publics need to be cultivated with the understandings that (1) these publics have already formed into "tribes" that have developed their own meanings, (2) these meanings cannot be managed by traditional product and service orientations and, (3) public relations can best situate the organization with these publics by offering ways in which "tribe members can meet and enhance their interpersonal bonds in the hope that these tribe members will reciprocate this effort" (p. 876).

In a related vein, the arena of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is beginning to broaden to include a public relations sensibility: the realization that corporations use narratives to articulate who they are and the reality as they see it as a vital part of establishing their connections to communities. "CSR itself is a societal narrative that is enacted within public discourse. . . . CSR communication can therefore be regarded as a sensemaking process . . ." observed [Wehmeier and Schultz \(2011, p. 477\)](#). More recently, [Coombs and Holladay \(2012\)](#) similarly pointed to the importance of narrative in helping the corporation garner "acceptance and cooperation," especially as involves changes that are brought about by new CSR initiatives (p. 45).

While it would be problematic to categorize Schertz's efforts for Mobil as a CSR initiative, it is instructive to examine how he led an effort at Mobil to build a sensemaking corporate persona. This persona was designed to garner support by showing how its values and actions resonated with the concerns of the average American, and in the process, allowed the Mobil corporation to assert that, in the face of energy-related challenges, it is working to uphold and strengthen a mutually beneficial society.

3. Public relations prominence of Mobil Oil and Schertz

In 1969, Mobil's Chairman Rawleigh Warner put Herbert Schertz, a former private practice lawyer and political operative, into the position of Vice President of Public Affairs because Warner wanted to enhance the government outreach component of Mobil's public affairs. Schertz, who had already moved from Mobil's labor relations department into its corporate planning, was viewed by Mobil as particularly well-qualified to improve the company's ability to address policy and policymakers because, prior to coming to Mobil, he was a volunteer in the presidential campaigns for John and Robert Kennedy and for George McGovern. Indeed, after a couple of years at the public relations helm, Schertz concluded that he was "the manager of an ongoing political campaign . . . There's no question that my job is a lot closer to the confrontational style of politics than it is to the conventional niceties of corporate public relations" ([Schertz, 1986, p. 17](#)). Accordingly, Schertz saw that his campaign for Mobil called for moving beyond his previous experience of the calendar-driven "politics of elections" toward advocacy centered within the never-ending "politics of policy" ([Schertz, 1986, p. 18](#)).

Schertz's orientation toward policy was particularly apt because, at the start of the 1970s, the U.S. oil companies were at the forefront of several issues: an increasing reliance on foreign oil, spikes in gas prices due to conflict in the Middle East, higher total profit levels for the oil companies, and increasing calls for regulation from environmental activists and government officials. Under Schertz' direction, Mobil pursued an assertive public relations approach designed to position the company as an outspoken expert on "energy future and major social issues," so that it could "initiate debate on major public issues" and influence public support for public policy that was favorable to the company ([Mobil, 1982, p. i](#)). Mobil's efforts were extensive, including the development of aggressive op-ed advertising, offering financial support for original public television programming, and establishing a "Secretariat" office at Mobil HQ that monitored oil-related news

¹ Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, across several decades, studied how individuals acted within social and professional settings (e.g., reform movements, academe, and journalism) and noted how individuals develop dispositions based on their interactions with others and the environment that structure those interactions ([Bourdieu, 1977](#)). Dispositions shape each individual's understanding about what range of actions and attitudes appear to fit within the environment; Bourdieu called this the "potentialities inscribed in the body of agents and in the structure of the situations where they act" ([Bourdieu, 1998, p. vii](#)).

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