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1994

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Recommended Citation

Spira provides insight on animal rights movement. (1994). *International Barometer*, 9, (11-12): 1-2.

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Spira Provides Insight on Animal Rights Movement

"We've got a budget and staff exactly 1/300th of the previous speaker's," noted Henry Spira, coordinator of Animal Rights International. He stood beside the podium, and spoke without notes for 40 minutes, offering a very candid and personal insight to why and how his group operates. Audience members ranked his presentation "excellent," without exception.

"I have been involved in civil rights -- and a variety of movements -- since I was a teenager," Spira said. "Twenty-one years ago, I read an article by Peter Senger that said, -- not that dogs and cats aren't cute, but -- we *don't have the right* to harm others. Senger gave a course in D.C., and when it was finished, I invited anyone who was interested in turning philosophy into action to come and meet at my house," he recalled.

"The culture of animal rights was like a priesthood unto itself," continued Spira. "It was a matter of relieving pain, but more importantly, of producing a dictum. A number of experiments then being conducted were targets for illustrating this dictum, and ARI needed to choose its focus. Spira said, "I would talk with people on trains, see where animal rights ideas were in synch with the public. For an issue to be effective," he said, "a (targeted) organization must be *out of synch* with the public."

As its first campaign, the nascent ARI selected studies funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The work was being conducted in a lab at New York City's American Museum of Natural History. When they finished, the lab was dismantled. "The Museum figured the only way they could operate was if the public was not aware (of their activities)," Spira said. "If what you're doing is o.k. on the six-o'clock news, you're o.k. If not," he said, "you've got problems.

"Halting NIH studies was energizing to the animal rights community," continued Spira. "We took a focus, challenged it, and closed it down. Our next big project was the Draize Test, a rabbit experiment. We picked that because Science said the test would be a good one to replace," recalled Spira.

"Cosmetic companies sell an image, and it doesn't take much to tarnish that image. We asked for, and got, access to Revlon and requested that 1/100th of 196 of revenues go to research to develop an alternative (to the Draize Test). We sat (at Revlon) with a view of Central Park, and had drinks brought to us," he recalled. But, the visitors went away without meeting their goal.

"Most companies have a whole brigade of folks who keep (a buffer) to the CEO, who has no access to the public except once a year, and that's at the shareholder meeting. ARI bought one share of stock and repeated the funding alternatives request to the CEO at the annual meeting." Still, nothing happened. "Then, we ran a full-page ad. Always put a question mark in your ad copy," Spira pointed out. "It covers you, legally."

Subsequently, Revlon named a new CEO, and under the new regime, funds were given. Spira noted, "We went to Avon next and said, 'You're second in the industry. You can do no less.' Avon gave money and founded the Johns Hopkins University center for alternatives to animal testing.

"A Turn Around"

"These folks were totally against us, at first," noted Spira. "Ten years after we did our ad for Revlon, they ran full-page ads in women's magazines saying, 'None of our products is tested on animals.' When we met with Procter & Gamble, including the science folks there, a whole tum around had occurred," Spira remarked. "They felt this was an emerging issue we want to address pro-actively. P&G has prepared over 100 publications on testing," he noted. "They are putting resources in-house instead of in outside research." Spira added, "The best defense is to be pro-active and therefore disarm the activists."

Farm Animal Reform: Next AR Focus

Next, Spira turned his attention to "the plight of seven billion farm animals." In this campaign to end farm animal suffering, ARI is sending three messages, noting that (1) Inhumane activities are not right; (2) The public won't stand for it; and (3) Change is inevitable. Spira observed that already, the industry has moved from shackling and hoisting conscious animals, to using restrainers.

In November, ARI asked Frank Perdue to give money for a Center for Farm Animal Well-Being, "because he gives a lot of money to a university in Maryland, anyway," Spira commented. The request has not been granted.

"I think the whole animal rights movement will move to the farm," concluded Spira. "The cause of 95% of the suffering is in animal farms. If we don't address that, it looks like we are just targeting areas for fundraising, not really relieving the pain and suffering of the animals."

During the Q&A session, Spira mentioned a recent article he wrote entitled, "Should you Take an Activist to Breakfast?" He added, "Even better than taking an activist to breakfast is to be responsive to issues of concern to the public."

An audience member asked whether there is a "Code of Ethics" for activists. "For example" he asked, "Would you use stolen information for your ad campaign?" Spira answered "Oh yeah, sure. I don't have any problem with that." In response to another question on the types of corporate information ARI seeks, Spira noted, "We want to find out what's the culture of this company? What is its past track record? Do they see issues as problems with solutions, or do they see a Holy War, or do they see issues as a topic for direct mail?" He added, "It's best to say, 'This is an issue. We're concerned. Here's what we're going to do about it' -- and not just PR."

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