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Tackling the Titans

The successful strategy of animal-rights activist Henry Spira

Erik Marcus

"PUPPY LOVE: Animal Activist Charged in Bomb Attempt," screamed the front-page headline of the Nov. 12, 1988, *New York Daily News*. Police charged Fran Trutt, an obscure animal-rights activist from Queens, N.Y., with planting a pipe bomb outside the headquarters of United States Surgical Corp., a Norwalk, Conn.-based manufacturer of surgical supplies. Trutt's bomb attempt, the article explained, stemmed from her outrage that the company kills 1,000 dogs every year to demonstrate surgical stapling techniques.

The case created a public-relations nightmare for the animal-rights movement. Though they may be strident in their approach, most major animal-rights organizations work hard to distance themselves from terrorists. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the largest animal-rights group in the United States, quickly denied any connection to Trutt.

But one man came forward to help her out. Henry Spira, coordinator of Animal Rights International, started making calls to find Truce a lawyer. Then he hopped a train to the Stamford, Conn., courthouse to see if Trutt needed additional help. Talking to her, Spira became suspicious that what he had read in the papers was not the whole story. At his urging, reporters and detectives began digging deeper and found that Trutt actually had been set up: She had been befriended by paid agents of United States Surgical Corp. who got her the bomb, drove her to company headquarters to plant it and later tipped off the police. Their motive: to galvanize public sentiment against the animal-rights movement.

At first, Spira seems an unlikely person to involve himself in this scenario. In a movement often dominated by extremists, Spira makes his mark by consistently favoring dialogue over confrontation. His moderate approach hasn't endeared him to the more vocal members of the animal-rights movement, however. PETA co-founder Ingrid Newkirk calls Spira's approach "hobnobbing in the halls with our enemy."

But Spira doesn't consider his targets to be enemies. To be targeted by him is to be worn out rather than beaten up. Unlike many other activists, the last thing Spira wants is to expose an offending company's practices to the public. Instead, he prefers to open a private dialogue with the company's decision-makers to find a resolution that will help the animals without hurting the company. The negotiations involve compromise, and Spira seldom walks away with an immediate and total victory. What he typically wins are concessions that will markedly reduce or eliminate killing and suffering according to a definite timetable.

"It's an issue of cultural change," Spira says of the effort to promote more humane treatment of animals. "It's not a problem of who's the good guy and who's the bad guy. You don't personalize things when you try to create change, and at all costs you avoid having the self-righteous attitude that 'we're the only moral people.' "

These soft words come from a man of intimidating stature. His bulk reflects his early days in the Merchant Marine, when he worked to root out corruption in the local maritime union. His hair is a shaggy gray mane that would make a buttoned-down Washington lobbyist cringe, but it seems fitting for a man who worked for decades in civil-rights groups. His rapid-fire New York City speech is peppered with plenty of slang--a relic, perhaps, of teaching English to inner-city high school students for 22 years.

A Blueprint for Change

- Try to understand the public's current thinking and where it could be encouraged to go tomorrow. Above all, keep in touch with reality
- Prioritize, set goals that are achievable, and bring about meaningful change one step at a time. Raising awareness is not enough.
- Establish credible sources of information and documentation. Never assume anything. Check everything out at the source.
- Never deceive the media or the public. Maintain credibility. Don't exaggerate. Don't hype the issue.
- Select a target on the basis of vulnerabilities, the numbers of animals involved, the intensity of suffering and the opportunities for change.
- Develop a campaign blueprint that is realistic, practical and doable.
- Seek dialogue. Attempt to work together to solve problems. Position issues as problems with solutions, not as wars without prisoners. This approach is best achieved by presenting realistic alternatives.
- Be ready for confrontation if your target remains unresponsive; if accepted channels don't work, place your adversary on the defensive by preparing an escalating public-awareness campaign.

Today his spacious but spartan 12th-floor Manhattan apartment is home to Spira and his cat Nina as well as headquarters for Animal Rights International. He has ringed most of his rooms with 10-foot-high bookshelves that are crammed with thousands of files on animal issues. The shelves double as a feline jungle gym, and Nina periodically dives from the top shelves onto whatever is available to make the loudest crash.

Spira's involvement with animals began in 1975, when he reluctantly accepted a cat from an acquaintance who wanted to give up the animal. Soon Spira became "uncomfortable playing with one [animal] and sticking a knife and fork into another." The year he became a vegetarian, he also happened upon Peter Singer's 1973 New York Review of Books article on animal rights (which Singer expanded into his landmark 1975 book *Animal Liberation*).

Singer's compelling argument influenced Spira to get involved in the then-fledgling animal-rights

movement. Spira says his shift of focus from human rights to animal rights came from his growing awareness that "in the hierarchy of exploitation and domination, it's really the nonhuman animals who are on the bottom of the whole pile." He decided that the successful tactics for fighting human injustice could be used equally well to fight what he views as injustice to animals.

Spira didn't need to look far to find instances of animal abuse. Four blocks from his apartment, at the American Museum of Natural History, a long-term experiment was underway in which cats were blinded and deafened by having parts of their brains removed, and then monitored for changes in their mating habits. To gather ammunition, Spira spoke to several respected scientists who called the tests scientifically worthless. Armed with criticism from the scientific community, Spira met with the museum's scientists and representatives to ask them to stop the tests.

The tests continued, but so did Spira. He engineered a campaign to rally public opinion against the museum. Every weekend for 18 months, Spira and his supporters protested in front of the august New York institution. As a result, the museum received hundreds of membership cancellations, as well as unflattering exposure in *Science* and *Newsweek* magazines. In 1976, the National Institutes of Health withheld funding, and the experiments were halted.

Spira's victory saved only a few dozen cats, but it set a precedent: Public outrage had stopped animal experimentation. "Animal experimenters were regarded as a priesthood," Spira recalls. "Our aggressive public-awareness campaign turned that notion around by exposing the absurdity of their mutilations and demanding accountability-how much pain for how much gain?"

Buoyed by his success in halting the museum's tests, Spira turned his attention to the image-conscious cosmetics industry. Industry leader Revlon, like most cosmetics companies in 1978, routinely used the Draize test to assess the safety of its products. In this test, concentrated solutions of a product are dripped into the eyes of a conscious rabbit. Sometimes the rabbit's eyes are clipped open. The amount of damage done to a rabbit's eyes--from redness and swelling to blindness--is used as a crude assessment of the substance's irritancy.

As in his museum campaign, Spira first quietly approached those in charge. "We wanted to promote alternatives to the Draize rabbit-blinding test, so we urged industry leader Revlon to help fund the research," Spira says. He met with representatives at Revlon for more than a year and sent them stacks of proposals, but the company took no action. Spira realized he was being brushed aside. "When they dillydallied," Spira says, "we ran ads juxtaposing their dream of beauty with the reality nightmare of rabbits being Draized." In 1980, full-page ads in *The New York Times* and other newspapers asked, "How many rabbits does Revlon blind for beauty's sake?" The ads detailed the Draize procedure and called for Revlon to adopt alternative methods of testing.

The resulting consumer outcry turned into a public-relations debacle for the cosmetics giant. Revlon received a flood of consumer complaints. Organizers from other animal-rights groups began an international boycott of Revlon cosmetics. Protesters gathered in front of Revlon's Manhattan headquarters, wearing bunny suits and demonstrating for an end to animal testing.

Within six months, Revlon promised to funnel at least \$750,000 into a research program at Rockefeller University in New York City to develop alternatives to the Draize test. Spira publicly praised the company as it cut back on the number of animals used in tests. In 1989, Revlon announced that all lab-animal testing had been eliminated from its cosmetics operations. In its ads, the company quickly capitalized on its new, cleaned-up image: "Introducing Revlon Pure Skin Care," read one such ad. "Finally, skin care you can believe in 100 percent ... 100 percent non-animal-tested formula."

The Three R's

Henry Spira embraces the "3R" approach to animal issues: Replace, Reduce and Refine.

REPLACE means to do away with the source of the abuse. It suggests eating beans instead of chickens or using in-vitro tests instead of animals in the lab.

REDUCE signifies eating fewer chickens and more beans or reducing the number of animals used in lab tests.

REFINE suggests that if you can't change the number of animals affected, at least recognize that they are living creatures with feelings and do whatever is possible to minimize their pain.

Other companies, keenly aware of the damage that consumer boycotts could inflict upon their bottom line, quickly followed Revlon's lead in eliminating animal tests. Today, consumer pressure has dramatically curtailed laboratory-animal testing in the cosmetics industry. And many household products companies are pouring their resources into funding alternative testing methods. Procter and Gamble, for example, spent \$4.6 million in 1991 to develop alternatives to testing on lab animals.

In the animal-rights movement, moderates like Spira are frequently dismissed as "sell-outs" who compromise the movement's larger goals in exchange for token reduction of animal suffering. Some activists ask how Spira could praise Revlon for reducing the number of rabbits on which it conducted Draize tests when rabbits were still suffering. But Peter Singer, to whom many of these activists owe their calling, has only praise for Spira, judging him "the most successful activist in the United States in reducing ... the universe of pain and suffering." James M. Jasper and Dorothy Melkin, authors of *The Animal Rights Crusade* (Free Press, 1992) agree. Spira, they say, is "a prominent example of a pragmatist," whose "negotiating style may be the only one that could improve conditions of factory farming."

And that's exactly what Spira pursued next. He turned his attention to the meat industry, which slaughters 6 billion animals yearly in the United States alone. He doesn't expect to end animal slaughter. He also rejects the possibility of worldwide conversion to vegetarianism. Instead, his efforts are based on "pushing the peanut ahead," by seeking incremental changes that reduce suffering for as many animals as possible.

Some victories take months or years to achieve. When a company refuses to make meaningful concessions or won't come to the bargaining table at all, Spira takes the matter to the public. His current public-rallying cry is aimed at Perdue Farms of Salisbury, Md., the fourth largest poultry producer in the country. Perdue Farms is particularly vulnerable because its media-hungry chief executive, Frank Perdue, has consistently bragged about the "resort living" of his chickens in his homespun commercials.

Initial attempts at dialogue reached an impasse and forced Spira into the ring. It became, says Spira, "the jump-off point for catapulting the suffering of 7 billion farm animals onto the national agenda."

Spira repeatedly contacted Perdue Farms, providing a list of proposals for improving the living conditions of its chickens. "We tried to go through channels to have a productive dialogue with Perdue," Spira says. "By not responding, Perdue forced us to go public."

On Nov. 30, 1989, after 31 months of trying to talk with Perdue, Spira made one last attempt. He wrote to Frank Perdue: "Many years of working with different corporate sectors have taught us that constructive negotiations are more productive than ongoing confrontation Now I would like to once again suggest that it may be productive for us to meet in order to discuss opportunities for developing realistic solutions to pressing problems ... solutions that may well allow you to play a pioneering role similar to Revlon in 1979."

Elaine Barnes, Perdue's executive assistant, wrote back: "Perdue sees no value in meeting with people [seeking a meatless society] ... who also are engaged in dissemination of half-truths and distortions that border on extortion."

The response spurred Spira to public action. In early 1990, he released to public scrutiny a vision of Perdue's empire quite at variance with the happy, downhome image in the company's ads. "Frank, are you telling the truth about *your* chickens?" asked full-page ads in major newspapers, with caricatures of Frank Perdue drawn with a Pinocchio-sized nose. The ads accused Perdue of a wide range of unsavory business practices, including mistreatment of workers, Mafia connections and deplorable living conditions for his birds.

The public outcry hasn't been as noisy as before. Although Spira is trying to protect billions of animals, this time his public-relations tool isn't cute kittens or fuzzy bunnies, which more easily arouse public sympathy. This time it's chickens, which most of the American public views as food, not pets or wildlife.

Spira hasn't managed to transform Perdue and the rest of the chicken industry to the extent that he turned around the cosmetics business. But his Perdue campaign already has had a positive effect on the slaughterhouse business.

Although Perdue continues to ignore him, Spira is capitalizing on his current campaign in order to improve conditions in slaughterhouses where conscious cattle are shackled and hoisted upside down. Spira wants to see these systems replaced by the more humane, upright restrainer systems. Here's his tactic: He approaches national companies that buy meat from the offending slaughterhouses and warns them that they too could find themselves portrayed in unflattering terms in newspaper ads and subject to consumer boycotts unless they pressure their suppliers to adopt humane slaughtering techniques.

Three companies already have adopted these changes rather than be exposed, and Spira has honored his commitment not to publicize their names. And he credits the Perdue campaign with motivating these companies to change. "The [Perdue] ads have made it possible to have a dialogue with the meat industry to activate alternatives," Spira says. "Part of the reason why that was made possible is that they don't want to be Perdueed."

But Frank Perdue can rest assured that Henry Spira won't go away. Spira will keep exposing the animal abuses that go on in the chicken industry and beyond, patiently applying pressure for change. And over time, Spira says, the ranks of those who agree with him will grow. "I don't think the animal-rights movement is a fashion or a fad," he says. "It's just a logical next step. It's only been relatively recently that all humans have started to be included in the circle of society's concern--Native Americans, Blacks, women, and so on. Once you've got all humans within this circle, it's just inevitable that the next step is going to be the nonhuman animals."

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