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Take an Activist to Breakfast?

Henry Spira

“Nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come.” Or so the saying goes. As powerful as multibillion-dollar corporations may appear, they are a great deal more vulnerable to advocacy campaigns than is realized. Whenever corporate behavior is not in sync with public attitudes, a handful of activists can generate the leverage necessary to encourage or force change. Street-smart corporations may want to invite an activist to breakfast, if only to get the word from an “early-warning system.”

I know firsthand how leverage works. For the past 19 years, I have coordinated coalitions of animal-rights advocates; we have worked to position issues as problems with solutions that benefit both humans and animals. As a result, we've been able to raise public awareness and place animal well-being on corporate and scientific agendas.

Our strategies are adapted from successful human-rights struggles. This pattern is not “all-or-nothing” but a cumulative buildup of activities. In order to influence people and institutions, it's usually best to focus on one issue at a time without losing sight of the ultimate goals. And it's necessary to be realistic about where society stands on an issue today and where it may be encouraged to go tomorrow. In choosing campaigns, we focus on issues that we believe companies cannot defend.

In the mid-1970s our first coalition was pulled together to overcome an image of the animal-protection movement as a perennial loser. We obtained a computer printout of ongoing animal experiments in the New York City area and came across a series of painful and useless cat experiments performed at the prestigious American Museum of Natural History. We tried to talk with museum officials; we worked the phones and the mail; I even registered for a course in animal behavior at the museum, hoping to gain access to officials. The museum would not respond. In effect, they forced us to launch a public-awareness campaign. And we obliged with newspaper articles, radio shows, full-page ads, and demonstrations every weekend for 18 months. The protest ended when the labs were dismantled and 60 cats were saved. This campaign put animal researchers on notice that the public holds them accountable, and that there is no support for pain where there is no significant gain.

This campaign set our pattern. We attempt to work through channels and, when that's not possible, we look for vulnerabilities and leverage. With new confidence we approached Revlon Inc. and urged the cosmetics-industry giant to fund the development of alternatives to the Draize eye test, which measures the irritancy of chemicals by the damage done on the eyes of conscious rabbits. In contrast to the museum, Revlon provided us with all the access we wanted. And all we asked was that Revlon put one-hundredth of 1 percent of their sales into research for alternative testing. We thought the public would find that formula reasonable, but Revlon did nothing.

Revlon was extremely vulnerable because we were able to juxtapose the dream of beauty with the nightmare of the rabbits. Michel Bergerac took note of what I had to say at the Revlon shareholders meeting but took no action. So we ran full-page ads in *The New York Times* asking, “How many rabbits does Revlon blind for beauty's sake?” This struck a chord with the public. Within a year, Revlon gave a three-year, \$750,000 grant to fund an alternative research program at Rockefeller University at a cost greater than what we had originally suggested.

We hailed Revlon as a pioneer, welcomed them as an ally, and encouraged other companies to follow their lead. Within days, Avon Products Inc. agreed to provide another \$750,000, which helped launch the Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing at Johns Hopkins University.

These events established the legitimacy and promise of the search for alternatives to animal testing. Since 1986 Procter & Gamble Co. has spent more than \$25 million to develop alternative methods; their researchers have published or presented more than 100 papers on alternatives. Hoffmann-La Roche Inc. has reduced its use of animals by 75 percent over a seven-year period. Colgate-Palmolive Co. has publicly committed to the long-term goal of completely replacing the use of animals with alternative methods. And 10 years after being challenged, Revlon placed full-page ads publicizing their "Pure Skin Care" line with its "100 percent non-animal tested formula."

This strategy has worked. During the past decade a whole new scientific discipline of non-animal toxicology has entered the scientific mainstream, and there has been a massive reduction in the use of laboratory animals.

Loosing the Shackles

When dealing with laboratory animals, one speaks in millions. When dealing with farm animals, one speaks of 7 billion animals raised for dinner every year that account for more than 95 percent of animal suffering.

While our media campaigns have at times generated high visibility, more often than not, progress has been achieved less spectacularly. Shackling and hoisting was such a case, long an urgent candidate for change. It consists of placing a shackle around an animal's back leg, then hoisting the struggling animal, which may weigh over 1,000 pounds, into the air until fully suspended by that one leg.

Instead of launching a negative public-awareness campaign, I quietly approached the CEO of a major Midwestern meat-packing company; he was considered progressive and innovative, had invested considerable effort in upgrading his company's worker-safety record, and was proud of these achievements.

At our meeting, we discussed the upright restrainer system--a less traumatic device developed in 1980, no longer experimental and recently commercially available. His reaction was to bring in industry experts and phase out the shackling within weeks.

I had good reason to be encouraged. With a single meeting and a few letters and phone calls we had accomplished what decades of vitriolic campaigning had failed to do. I reasoned that successful dialogue with just a handful of large meat packers would virtually eliminate the shackling and hoisting of conscious animals.

Unfortunately, the next meat packer ignored repeated letters and phone calls. So we contacted one of its most important customers, a nationally celebrated manufacturer of luncheon meats. We explained the problem and pointed out the incongruity between the low-grade practice of shackling and hoisting and their inspirational advertising slogan.

The company's chief officer replied to my letter by promising to deal with the meat packer and keep us informed. Clearly, he had the leverage to make things happen. He attempted to work out the problem amicably with his supplier. When the supplier did not respond with a sense of urgency--and even appeared deceptive--the meat executive replaced it with a supplier that met their corporate standards.

We engaged in protracted dialogue with fast-food giant McDonald's Corp. When it appeared that nothing was happening, we joined forces with Franklin Research and Development Corp., a socially responsible investment-advisory firm, and filed a joint shareholder resolution. Intense negotiations resulted in McDonald's demanding that its suppliers adhere to guidelines for the humane treatment of farm animals. Now we will contact restaurant, hotel, and supermarket chains and urge them to promote and offer a greater variety of meatless food and set standards for their suppliers.

Since our Revlon campaign, corporations have been responsive to our concerns. A singular exception has been the high-profile broiler mogul, Frank Perdue. Perdue Farms Inc.'s environmental, workers' safety, and food-safety history has been atrocious, and the conditions for the birds, shocking. He may be no better or worse than his colleagues, but for decades he has engaged in what we considered deceptive advertising, bragging about his pampered chickens. We simply proposed that the company conduct research on more humane methods of raising poultry. We were *not* asking them to preside over the liquidation of their empire. But by refusing to even acknowledge our concerns, they forced us into a public-awareness campaign.

We ran full-page ads in *The New York Times*, highlighting questionable aspects of their business activity. We also filed papers with the Department of Consumer Affairs on deceptive advertising and encouraged the Council on Economic Priorities to give Perdue a Dishonorable Mention. The company pulled the ad in question *and* received a Dishonorable Mention. Our public visibility helped open doors to other segments of the industry.

I began this article by asking, should you take an activist to breakfast? The answer is a qualified yes. Corporations who open a dialogue with activists should keep several things in mind. First, know whom you're dealing with. An effective activist will thoroughly research your organization prior to making contact. You should do the same. What's the track record of the individual and the organization? Call, your colleagues--what's their experience?

You'll discover that legitimate, effective activists view issues as problems amenable to solutions, while others see issues as nothing more than media hype and fund-raising opportunities. And isn't past behavior the best predictor of what happens next?

Before you meet, make sure you're talking with somebody anchored in reality. At a breakfast meeting, a senior corporate official told me that he had just declined to meet a prominent activist because he felt the demands were calculated to put his company out of business. The outcome was predictable. As the corporate executive put it, "There's nothing I can do for him."

Some corporate leaders ask, reasonably enough, what's in it for them, when other major companies who have been responsive have gotten bashed anyway. The fact of the matter is that if you're perceived as a good target, there's no guarantee that you won't get attacked even if you're improving. But a company that can legitimately point to an energetic, meaningful, and productive program will effectively deflect criticism.

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