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Better Mousetrap? Of Emerson, Ethics, and Postmillennium Persuasion

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❑ *Ralph Waldo Emerson reputedly said, "If you build a better mouse trap, the world will beat a path to your door." In this article, Emerson's actual quote is seen to infer a simple rule: quality supply attracts quantity demand. Such a rule could imply that enitre businesses related to persuasion, such as public relations, advertising, and marketing seem at best unnecessary and at worst unethical. However, Emerson's logic may not apply in modern market places driven by multiple competing images. This article proposes eithical thresholds for persuasion and examines the relationship of these thresholds to public relations theory. Two case studies are analyzed in which better-mousetrap logic is applied to test the viability of these thresholds.*

> If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, though he builds his home in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door.
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson
> (Yule and Keane, 1889/1891, p. 88)

This quotation, first attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson in print in 1889, has a curious history. It is based on notes taken during an Emerson lecture in San Francisco or Oakland in 1871 (Stevenson, 1935). Sarah S. B. Yule or Mary S. Keene recorded notes at the lecture and then transcribed the brief excerpt in their coauthored quotation anthology *Borrowings* (1889/1891).

Although it is now impossible to know how accurate the Yule and Keene (1889/1891) transcription from memory was, Emerson did write a passage within his essays that conveyed the same spirit as the now famous "better mousetrap" proverb. In *Common Sense*, published in 1855, Emerson wrote

> If a man has good corn, or wood, or boards, or pigs to sell, or can make better chairs or knives, crucibles, or church organs, than anybody else, you will find a broad, hard-beaten road to his house, though it be in the woods. (Emerson, 1909, p. 528)

Inherent within both of these quotations, one hearsay but popular, the other actual but obscure, is this implication: There is a direct relation between product quality and customer demand. From a strictly Emersonian perspective, professional persuasion is unnecessary to promote quality products, services, or ideas. Quality speaks for itself through customer satisfaction, which affects word-of-mouth publicity. The sense behind Emerson's two dicta is that quality products come to dominate the market by forces similar to the laws of natural selection. Ostensibly the fittest products—that is, those of greatest craftsmanship and stamina—will flourish in the marketplace without the need for persuasive promotion.

Thus, in a strict Emersonian-cum-Spencerian/Darwinian universe, persuasion is probably inherently unethical. Persuasion appears to be a form of conning or manipulation only necessary to interest customers in second-rate products. On reflection such persuasive practices seem in direct conflict with ethical ideals such as "tell the truth"; "improve the lot of others"; "recognize merit"; "maximize good, minimize harm"; "do the greatest good for the greatest number"; and "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

If we strictly apply Emersonian logic inferring that superior products and services will automatically succeed, it follows that persuasive communication is inherently deceptive. Clients and customers are persuaded to buy mediocre and inferior products not for the reasons they are told ("this is the best," "it is good for you"), but rather, in many cases, to magnify corporate profits (Marx, 1900), growth (Galbraith, 1967), or image (Boorstin, 1972).

To be fair to Emerson, he does not say, "If you build an inferior wagon, chimney, or fruitcake, it would be unethical to sell it." Nor does he say, "If you build a better mousetrap, you need not initially persuade people to sample it." Nor does he write, "People should never buy lower quality products occasionally to save money, trouble, or time." Such statements seem to be corollaries to his better-known expressions, but they raise questions about whether his implied marketplace is ruled by absolute laws or permits exceptions.

Perhaps Emerson would have been realistic in allowing such exceptions. One cannot be certain in his absence. However, if it is implied that his general rule—quality supply invites quantity demand—is typically accurate, then entire businesses related to persuasion, such as public relations, advertising, and marketing, seem at best unnecessary and at worst unethical. A discussion of how Emerson's logic may be interpreted and applied in modern marketplaces introduces possible ethical thresholds for persuasion. A look at two cases in which his better-mousetrap logic may apply tests the utility of those thresholds.

Postmillennium Ethics

Emerson's idealized, transcendental logic may well have been more appropriate within a 19th-century preelectric America. In the global realities of the 21st century, several questions are not easily answered by the implications of Emerson's vision. Consider these contemporary queries.

What is better?

In an age of mixed yet culturally diverse values, competing product designs, long-term versus short-term needs, price wars, and a mixture of human needs and personalities, is "better" an absolute that may be easily identified in every case? Does not the current question of "What is a better mousetrap?" evoke others such as "Does better mean 'environmentally friendly'? Nontoxic? More 'humane' to mice? Longer lasting? Cheaper? Less visible? More attractive? More customer friendly? Better track record with *Consumer Reports*? Instantly lethal?" In India cows are sacred, so is a better hamburger an oxymoron, or does it mean a vegetarian burger, or, given that many beef eaters do live in India, does it mean tastier, healthier, prepared quicker, more nutritious, cheaper, less fattening, more energizing, or all of these?

Does natural selection occur in the mass mediated marketplace?

Do the laws of natural selection apply in a world where artificial rules supercede natural ones, in which mass media dominate word-of-mouth, in which "image" (Boorstin, 1972) may overpower substance? For example, if an unknown Alaskan candidate is running for U.S. President without money, image makers, media appearances, or travel, how will voters "make a beaten path to his door"? No matter how much integrity, experience, statesmanship, and expertise this candidate possesses—perhaps even with a PhD in foreign policy and 20 years in the state senate—how may he, as an unknown, compete favorably with wealthy, media-savvy, household-word candidates? Persuasion seems essential not only to counteract other forms of persuasion (such as the ad campaigns of known candidates) but also to achieve visibility in the first place. If dozens of mousetraps already have high-quality public relations (PR) campaigns worldwide (as opposed to high-quality products), how may a start-up company, seeking to obtain legal, copyright, and union protection, give customers a fresh choice without significant investment in media exposure?

Does natural selection work in a world of language inflation? Bok (1978) and Schneider (2000) noted the pressures on professors to write letters of recommendation that inflate the accomplishments and potential of candidates for graduate school. If a professor knows that other letters of recommendation will inflate the value of other candidates, then writing an honest letter about a candidate will create an unfair playing field. To level the playing field, the professor is tempted to lie or inflate the worth of the candidate. Similarly, if several products each claim to be "the best" on national television, how will a product that is truly the best stand out? Products do not compete so much with other products as with the images of other products (Boorstin, 1972). Can a product described without any persuasive or inflated rhetoric survive?

"Perception" becomes central to the 21st-century approach to persuasion. If a mousetrap is perceived as better, why should consumers be tempted to purchase another within the same price range and degree of availability? Moreover, if a mousetrap is perceived as better, it may be purchased without any evidence of superiority. Such perception relates to Boorstin's (1972) world of pseudoreality in which convincing images substitute for truth.

Although it may be difficult, after decades of experimentation, to make yet another better soap or orange juice, it is not so difficult to make a better perception, such as that the soap will improve your sex life or the juice will keep you young forever. Persuaders wish to sell the perceived fulfillment to customers' wants and desires. Because there is a competitive one-upmanship among persuaders to appeal to deeper and deeper human desires, the escalation of pseudoreality images about products also fuels the increasing language inflation.

Responsibilities

Such a norm of rhetorical escalation does not relieve the modern publicist, PR firm, advertiser, or sales force from ethical responsibilities. Each must reckon morally with the use and implications of the notion of better. Baker (1999) listed five baselines for the moral justification of persuasion. If a PR firm or other persuader wishes to be, in Baker's terms, at the higher end of the moral menu, the firm must be at least socially responsible and at best exemplify what is called the "kingdom of ends." Baker elucidated that the second highest system, "social responsibility," means one has a higher responsibility to community (cf. customers, clients, humanity) than to self. The highest or most virtuous system for Baker, kingdom of ends, like Kant's Categorical Imperative, calls for living one's life as if it were the role model for the world. People and actions are treated as ends in themselves, not justifications for unethical means to someone else's ends.

If professional persuaders wish to be publicly accountable through a kingdom of ends, or even practice social responsibility as described by Baker (1999), they must carefully evaluate their claims of a better mousetrap in this way:

1. Clear definition: Ethically, persuaders ought not to make claims of better without definition and clarification to the consumer. Is a better cigarette an oxymoron? If not, is it a cheaper, tastier, bigger, fresher, or healthier one? Is bigger better? Is it faster? Is more pain killer within a drug automatically better or might it produce side effects or blind a consumer to the hidden messages of pain? Persuaders must clearly articulate the meaning of *better.* Although the Federal Trade Commission and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) may legally allow "puffery," unsubstantiated claims of better, what is legal in one country is not necessarily ethical in that country or elsewhere.

2. Scientific evidence: Although better is often subjective as in a better tasting coffee, better often implies that there is objective data, such as when a car is said to be better because it is safer. Persuaders ought not to imply better in an objective sense unless there is independent, replicable, valid scientific evidence. Whenever possible, professional persuaders should provide the source and nature of the evidence. Failure to reveal the source and current status of full evidence may lead to deception by omission as can failure to disclose the absence of scientific evidence. Such failure may also lead to lawsuits, loss of credibility, and harm to both consumers and clients.

3. Context for comparison: *Better* and kindred terms *faster, cleaner, cheaper, softer, easier,* and so forth imply a comparative state between a product and its competition. Ethically, persuaders ought to declare the answer to the question, "Better than what?" It should be clear whether the product is arguably better than all comparable brands or only better than last year's predecessor model. Is it better than similar products within its price range or best of all? Is it better than it once was (i.e., "improved"), better than it always was, or is it being compared to one or more competing brands? Or, is using the product simply better than using no such product at all?

4. Audience sensitivity: Professional persuaders have an obligation to consider the nature of their audiences. A better condom may be an oxymoron to audiences who do not condone birth control. The multicultural and mixed-gender nature of most mass media audiences makes many claims of better questionable or inappropriate. For example, in Fiji women left the room when TV ads for tampons were shown. They were embarrassed to see the ads shown when men were present but also shocked to have such intimate, private matters made public among other women. No product or ad can be better if people refuse to purchase or view it. Ethically and ethnically, persuaders must ask, "To whom might the product be objectionable? Offensive? Worse? Better?" and "Why?"

Summarily, professional persuaders, to be ethical, ought to be accountable to consumers and clients alike. Persuaders may and ought to determine thresholds regarding the notion of better by clear definition, scientific evidence, context for comparison, and audience sensitivity. Thresholds are not only based on ideals but may be established according to such criteria as safety records, laboratory testing, comparative consumer satisfaction (e.g., *Consumer Reports*), and relative value within a culture.

21st-Century Policy

Emerson's claims may well have been true in the 19th century and are probably still accurate in a publicity vacuum in cases in which a product is demonstrably better to the satisfaction of all. However, within the 20th century described by Boorstin (1972) and Bok (1978), and now within the even more surreal hyper-bowl (cf. hyperbole) competition among 21st-century persuaders, there is no longer a justification for the implication that "All publicity claims are unethical." Instead the question has become, "Which claims are unethical?"

Barney and Black (1994) articulated well the postmodern realistic necessity for contemporary persuaders. Within a sea of products and persuaders, there must now be an ethics of advocacy. Without advocates, current products and services may not even become available, let alone visible and competitive.

Advocates, however, are also bound by ethical guidelines. Barney and Black (1994) correctly argued that persuasion advocates must, for example, abide by Bok's (1978) three tests for deception. These three tests of when to use deception are

> … first whether there are alternative forms of action which will resolve the difficulty without the use of a lie; second, what might be the moral reasons brought forth to excuse the lie; and what reasons may be raised as counter-arguments. Third as a test of these two steps, we must ask what a public of reasonable persons might say about such lies. (Bok, 1978, pp. 111–112)

When professional persuaders ask these three questions, they rarely find justification to deceive the public about the meaning of *better, best,* and similar superlative and comparative language. Professional persuaders must take pains to make sure that they are not practicing deception by defining what they mean by *better.* "Better according to what evidence?" "Better than what?" "Better in what way?" "Better according to whom?" "Better within which cultural context?" It is also important that such practitioners make sure their claims of better are internally consistent within all their own organization's communications.

Of PR Theory

Succeeding ethically in the marketplace requires communicators to work effectively within an adversarial marketplace as discussed by Barney and Black (1994) while realizing the moral responsibilities to society evident in Baker's (1999) discussion of ethical baselines for persuasion. The task of persuading people to buy products, services, and ideas by claiming superiority may fall within the domains of advertising, marketing, and PR. Although these functions are often integrated to increase sales and corporate profits, the idea of treating people and actions as ends rather than means fits best with the theoretical ideals of PR.

Marketers, advertisers, and PR people should all be held responsible for defining competitive claims, citing valid evidence, and clarifying the context for such comparisons. However, our final method for determining thresholds for ethical persuasion—seeking to understand audience sensitivities—falls squarely in the domain of PR. This is not to say that marketers and advertisers are not concerned with audience feedback, demographics, and psychographics. To be sure, focus groups and test marketing strategies are among the firmly established tactics within marketing and advertising. Nor does this mean that public relations people do not practice two-way communication with strong one-sided motivations. Such two-way communication activities, however, are solely designed as means to profitable ends for the organization that sponsors them. These activities, driven by self-interest, occupy the lower, if not lowest moral ground among Baker's (1999) baselines for ethical persuasion.

Grunig (1993) examined the ethics of two-way communication by developing models of PR that feature two types of two-way communication that an organization may have with its publics: two-way asymmetrical communication and two-way symmetrical communication. In Grunig's (1993) two-way *asymmetrical model* of PR, PR people primarily use feedback and research to persuade publics. That is, they use communications tactics and they use the people with whom they communicate primarily as means to the organization's ends (usually bottom-line profits). In contrast, the two-way *symmetrical model* depicts how publics and organizations may communicate more often in a balanced manner; publics have the same opportunity to influence organizations as organizations have to influence publics.

Grunig's (1993) model of two-way symmetrical communication may be more often prescriptive than descriptive in the field of PR, but it is clearly unique to PR among those industries promoting mousetraps. Symmetrical communication meshes with the third part of Bok's (1978) three-part test for deception: the test of "publicity." Bok's (1978) test of publicity requires professional communicators to shift perspectives and consider "what a public of reasonable persons might say" about ethical decisions. Although this shift in perspectives may be practiced in the form of a careful thought experiment, it requires that professional communicators rise above their roles as advocates and tellers of selective truth and consider how their own opinions may be biased. Communicators who see publics only as means to profitable ends will be hard pressed to predict what publics of reasonable persons might say about their decisions. However, those who primarily communicate with publics in a symmetrical manner will have a more accurate and less biased perspective from which to identify ethical claims.

Likewise, our test of audience sensitivities in determining the validity of a better-mousetrap claim means that professional persuaders should consider what their publics consider to be better before promoting their goods as such. This shift in perspectives requires two-way symmetrical communication with publics. Although such balanced communication at the moment of strategic decision making may be impractical—as when an unexpected question is asked at a live press conference—immediate decisions may be informed by past communication with the people potentially affected by the claim.

The PR practitioner who practices symmetrical communication will be in an optimal position to inform an organization's management team about those products, services, or ideas that are better from the perspective of the organization's publics. He or she will also be uniquely suited to decide those claims that are unethical in promoting his company's mousetraps in the competitive marketplace.

Of Persuasive Practice

Grunig's (1993) public relations models provide a good starting point for discussing how professional communicators can balance on the ethical tightwire between responsible collaboration with publics and successful advocacy in the marketplace (e.g., Grunig, 2000). Yet continuing the discussion of practical thresholds for making ethical claims in the competitive marketplace requires real cases. We examine two cases.

McNeil Consumer Healthcare's Benecol®

"Benecol Prelaunch: Laying the Foundation for Phenomenon" is presented by McNeil Consumer Healthcare in Jerry Hendrix's (2000) *Public Relations Cases.* McNeil Consumer Healthcare, a unit of Johnson & Johnson®, hired PR firm Hill & Knowlton to "help create a phenomenon" by introducing Benecol into the market for "cholesterol lowering functional foods" (p. 283).

Clear Definition

McNeil Consumer Healthcare defined *Benecol* as a "new line of cholesterol lowering functional foods" (as cited in Hendrix, 2000, p. 283). Trade media such as *Food Processing* magazine categorize this type of product as a "nutraceutical," a health food–drug hybrid (Zind, 2000). The unique point of comparison made between Benecol and other margarine-like spreads is an ingredient called *plant stanol ester.* Press materials described it as "an ingredient that helps promote healthy cholesterol levels.… Plant stanol ester is derived from natural plant sources. Stanol ester is also present in small amounts in foods such as corn, wheat, rye, oats, and olive oil" (as cited in Hendrix, 2000, p. 292).

The product was described by Diane Toops (2000), news and trends editor of *Food Processing* magazine, as one of the food and packaged goods industry's "genuinely new and different products". Benecol, then, was positioned as better than competing products based on its cholesterol-lowering ingredients.

Benecol was positioned as better than competing products.

Scientific Evidence

Plant stanol ester had already been tested in more than 24 scientific studies including reports published in *New England Journal of Medicine* and *Circulation.* McNeil and Hill & Knowlton analyzed these studies to conclude that the dietary ingredient was "clinically proven to reduce total cholesterol levels on average by 10%" and that "Benecol reduces LDL, or 'bad' cholesterol, on average by 14%" (as cited in Hendrix, 2000, pp. 283–284). The product had also been used in Finland for several years before becoming available in U.S. markets. Although evidence of Benecol's long-term health effects is still inconclusive, results from recent studies clearly demonstrate its short-term, cholesterol-lowering effects (Law, 2000).[2]

To get cholesterol-lowering results like the ones achieved in the scientific studies, however, consumers with high cholesterol must eat two to three servings of the product a day—a fact Benecol promoters didn't hide.

> Two to three servings a day with meals providing 3.4 grams of Plant Stanol Esters daily, as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease. Benecol Spread contains 1.7g Stanol Esters per serving. (Benecol, 2000)

Besides displaying this message prominently, the Benecol Web site for U.S. consumers includes a direct link to the FDA's "Talk Paper" on related issues. The paper, dated September 5, 2000, announced more leeway for Benecol and competing products in making promotional claims to include claims about "reducing the risk of coronary heart disease" (FDA, 2000).

Context for Comparison

McNeil's published case study referred only to a "formidable competitor" that announced a similar product in the same year. A November 8, 1999 American Heart Association news release reveals more about the competing product called *Take Control®*. "There are two FDA-approved cholesterol-lowering spreads.… Take Control contains vegetable oil sterol esters from soybeans.… Benecol contains plant stanol esters, which come from wood pulp from pine trees" (American Heart Association, 1999). Neither the American Heart Association nor the McNeil PR team made much of this difference. Rather, the McNeil PR team planned to compete with Take Control on the basis of name recognition rather than distinctive chemical properties. Their first objective was to "establish the Benecol brand and McNeil food/nutrition credentials with key science and consumer media and our primary audiences" (Hendrix, 2001, p. 284). Their second objective was to "preempt competitive threats by being the first to capture the public's 'mind share'" (Hendrix, 2000, p. 284).

Apparently the context for comparison with traditional margarine-type spreads was the efficacy of Benecol in lowering cholesterol, and the competition between Benecol and Take Control was based more on name recognition than any substantial difference between the two products themselves. Any claim that Benecol was better than Take Control was only implied by Benecol's highly publicized entry into the marketplace. For example, a May 17, 1998 news release issued by McNeil touted Benecol's FDA approval and referred to its "success in Finland since 1995 and its phenomenal launch in the United Kingdom earlier this year" (as cited in Hendrix, 2001, p. 288).

However, both Benecol and Take Control contain fat. Three servings of Benecol contain 27 g of fat. Some doctors caution against eating this much, whereas others emphasize that consuming Benecol or Take Control is better than eating regular margarine products ("Functional Foods," 2000; Mirkin, 2000). Another caveat for both products is that they are expensive. They cost about four to six times more per ounce than light margarine ("Functional Foods," 2000).

Audience Sensitivities

Authors of the case study mention several publics that were considered critical by Benecol promoters: consumers; nutritional scholars and advocates; media; regulatory agencies; "key McNeil players from the Regulatory, Professional Marketing, Medical, and Communications departments"; and grocery retailers. In communicating with each of these publics—McNeil's internal stakeholders as well as those outside of the organization—campaign planners were positioned well to practice two-way symmetrical communication. Obviously, regulatory agencies such as the FDA had the potential to influence the McNeil organization. One issue of "considerable bluster" was the content of health claims McNeil made in promoting Benecol (Neff, 1999). The FDA Talk Paper mentioned previously and Benecol's link to the FDA Web page suggest that the two organizations reached a resolution on the health-claims issues that was acceptable to both.

Yet how symmetrical was McNeil's communication with the other groups in determining if or how Benecol was a better mousetrap? Internal publics were consulted to produce a book of resources to help identify areas of potential crisis, or "what-if scenarios." And "Benecol briefings" were organized to encourage dialog between "a cadre of credible, recognized advocates, and thought leaders" (Hendrix, 2001, p. 285) and national and international media. Given the clear definition of Benecol and the scientific evidence presented, these tactics of communication meet our ethical requirements for audience sensitivity. That is, employees, Benecol advocates, news media who cover this industry, retailers, and the scientific community were all presumably willing and able to understand the issues involved and ready to participate in a fair discussion of the product.

A greater ethical challenge for McNeil, however, was to communicate openly with consumers to determine whether Benecol was better to them. McNeil conducted focus-group research to define their target audience as "Health/Diet Actives, a group comprised of about 40% of primary grocery shoppers, skewing strongly female with an average age of 52" (Hendrix, 2001, p. 284). The well-defined demographic profile continued: "Women within this category were diet-conscious yet had difficulty achieving health goals due to feelings of deprivation" (Hendrix, 2001, p. 284). From this profile, McNeil developed a strategy. "Hence all press materials to consumer media reflected the ease of incorporating Benecol into any daily lifestyle and the health benefit—with no deprivation—of doing so" (Hendrix, 2001, p. 284). McNeil also used data collected from survey research to "craft consumer messages" (as cited in Hendrix, 2000, p. 284). Given that consumers were not consulted for any other reason than to sell the product, this type of two-way communication is asymmetrical. But should consumers have been consulted?

Discussion

It can be argued that McNeil's advocacy for Benecol in the marketplace, which followed product development with input from professional, scientific, and regulatory publics, is part of a broader strategy of symmetrical communication. Even Grunig (2000) held that there is ethical room for what he called "mixed-motive" models of public relations in which collaboration and advocacy are both valued. According to Grunig (2000), symmetry "involves two-way advocacy—of both organizational and public interests" (p. 43). Bok (1978) also supported the idea that advocacy, and even deception, is justifiable if all parties involved are aware of and agree to the rules of conduct. Courts of law and games of poker are examples. Is the consumer marketplace different? Did McNeil and its agency Hill & Knowlton break any of the commonly understood rules of product promotion by implying that Benecol was better than Take Control? Or better than regular margarine?

The success of the Benecol PR effort lies in the fact that it flashed on the radar of the American consumer bright and early. How long will it survive the marketplace? Consumers of Benecol will have their say now. And knowing that the product has FDA approval and that no major protestors have made their voice heard in the marketplace, Benecol's target audience will likely make up their minds based on individual taste and cost benefit as much as promotion.

Nestlé's® Infant Formula

Whereas the Benecol case was documented as an example of effective public relations, Nestlé Corporation's marketing of infant formula products in Third World countries is documented as "a case of failed corporate responsibility" (Heath, 1997, p. 124).

Clear Definition

Infant formula is a substitute for a mother's breast milk, allowing mothers to feed their babies using a mixture of powdered formula and water. Apparently, Nestlé does not deceive mothers about the contents of the breast milk substitute itself. However, Nestlé's promotional strategies implying that formula is better than natural breast milk have been a source of controversy. The main points of contention between Nestlé and its critics are how the product is marketed and to whom.

Scientific Evidence

The question of whether baby formula is better than natural breast milk has been an issue for decades. However, evidence in favor of natural breast milk is most pronounced in underdeveloped countries. In documenting the origin of boycotts against Nestlé, James E. Post (1985) described the problems that physicians and established medical organizations such as the World Health Organization have observed.

> Sanitation and refrigeration are not generally available to the population in many such countries. Water supplies are unpurified, thereby increasing the probability that a formula mixed with local water will produce diarrhea and disease in the bottle-fed child. Poverty encourages the over-dilution of powdered formula, thereby reducing the amount of nutrition the child receives from each bottle. Once a mother's ability to breastfeed "lets down," the baby must be fed in an alternative way. If the mother is too poor to afford formula, which is an expensive product, there is the temptation and need to place other products in the baby bottle. These products may range from powdered whole milk (which is unsatisfactory for a baby's digestive system) to white powders such as corn starch. (p. 115–116)

According to Post (1985), the controversy over the use of baby formula has brought the attention of advocate groups, health professionals, and government agencies throughout the world and resulted in a "medical consensus about the desirability of breastfeeding as the best way to provide infant nutrition" (p. 115). On its Web site, even Nestlé (2000) acknowledges that "Breast milk is best for babies", and Nestlé encourages consumers to "consult your doctor or clinic for advice" before using formula (p. 115). However, Third-World consumers are not likely to purchase Nestlé products based on information delivered via the World Wide Web. In addition, Nestlé's promotional strategies have often contradicted their formal statements.

Context for Comparison

Nestlé promoted its products in impoverished areas with advertising that showed healthy, smiling, robust children. They used healthcare systems to distribute samples and posters. "Milk nurses," who were paid by commission by Nestlé, walked the halls of maternity wards in uniform advising mothers to use formula. Nestlé baby formula was featured in radio jingles, posters, and baby books. The healthy, smiling babies in the ads provided a sharp contrast to the undernourished babies of Third-World populations. "The advertising created an idealized image of what infants should look like and a clear concept of how the ideal could be achieved by even the most destitute of families" (Post, 1985, p. 116). The implied comparison, then, was that Nestlé's formula was better than natural breastfeeding as well as other brands of formula.

Audience Sensitivities

No evidence was found to suggest that Nestlé considered consumers in Third-World countries as anything more than means to profitable ends. This unbalanced relation became an issue Nestlé had to face, however, when activists organized a boycott against Nestlé products in 1977. The boycott remained in effect for many years and "many key publics" entered the fray, including "industry members, media, federal authorities, foreign governments, medical experts, and the World Health Organization" (Heath, 1997, p. 124). By 1981, Nestlé had hired and fired two PR agencies to try to change the company's image with no significant change in the company's practices.

Nestlé eventually cooperated with others in the industry and the World Health Organization to develop a code of marketing practices. Nestlé hired an outside organization to audit its efforts to improve marketing practices, and by 1984 the major boycotts were lifted.

Yet Nestlé's management strategy was far from a two-way symmetrical model of communication and understanding. Nestlé's extended initial resistance to change and eventual compromises with organized activists do not suggest any genuine concern for the mothers Nestlé and other industry leaders target in their Third World promotional campaigns. Heath (1997) documented the continuing opposition Nestlé faced in the early 1990s. Taylor (1998) studied and compared marketing practices in Bangladesh, Poland, South Africa, and Thailand and found that violations to the industry codes resulting from the baby formula controversy are still prevalent in underdeveloped countries. For example, the surveys revealed that formula companies still commonly give free samples of breast milk substitutes, infant formula, bottles, or teats to new mothers and use health facilities as distribution channels for promotional information.

Finally, consumer sensitivities and interests were ignored.

Discussion

Nestlé's persuasive promotion of baby formula in underdeveloped countries appears unethical on all counts. Nestlé failed to encourage mothers to make informed decisions by clearly defining how and when baby formula is better than natural breast milk. Nestlé downplayed relevant evidence that revealed the product's potential for harm. The image Nestlé created to promote its product in comparison to natural alternatives was presented in a distorted and deceitful context. Finally, among our four tests, consumer sensitivities and interests were ignored. That is, the mothers targeted for formula sales were clearly treated as means to profitable ends. Indeed, the PR and marketing practices employed by Nestlé are far from the ideals of Grunig's (1993) two-way symmetrical model of communication. The result is a case study in how not to practice public relations, evident in this case's inclusion in Stauber and Rampton's (1995) *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry.*

Better Is in the Eye of the Beholder?

Although better depends on the case, thresholds can be determined by considering the consumers and publics affected by a product, idea, or service in the marketplace. An optimistic perspective on the Benecol case study is that postmillennium persuasion does not have to be totally removed from Emerson's refreshing logic. If persuaders consider their publics when carefully evaluating their claims of better by considering the thresholds of clear definition, scientific evidence, context of comparison, and audience sensitivities, our capitalistic marketplace may remain somewhat grounded. The four thresholds offer practical opposition to the totalitarian *Image* of which Boorstin (1972) warned. In an adversarial marketplace, the final decisions on which products are indeed better will be based on consumer trial. Based on the ethics of Bok (1978), Baker (1999), and Grunig (2000), persuaders will be wise to communicate openly with those most affected by their claims.

As illustrated in the Nestlé case, however, the better mousetrap can be defeated in the marketplace when reliable, comparative information is withheld or distorted. This brings us back to our second question regarding Emersonian logic in the new millennium.

Does natural selection occur in the mass mediated marketplace? The Benecol case suggests that if persuaders operate ethically, the laws of natural selection will eventually manifest. Clever promoters will find a way to get their mousetraps noticed in the marketplace. They may even sustain interest for prolonged periods of time using strategic marketing, advertising, and PR. However, if persuaders remain ethical in their claims as discussed previously, informed consumers will eventually choose the mousetrap that is truly fittest for their own needs.

The Nestlé study, on the other hand, demonstrated how unethical persuasion interrupts the process of natural selection in the marketplace. Nestlé's images of robust, healthy babies posted in maternity wards of Third-World countries promoted formula to impoverished women using strategic images Boorstin (1972) would likely describe as extravagant even for wealthy American consumers. And the strategies worked. Rather than losing profits as a result of the controversy, the infant formula industry continued to thrive in developing nations (Post, 1985). Nestlé touts itself as the world's largest food company, with products marketed in nearly every country. This level of success, despite persuasive practices that do not meet the aforementioned thresholds for ethical behavior in the marketplace, contrasts with the optimistic thesis that solid business means solid ethics.

Does this mean that natural selection doesn't work in the mass mediated marketplace? Neither one of these case studies can provide a conclusive answer, but the implications are still encouraging. As in the theory of evolution of species, lasting changes are a product of numerous generations, not single cases. Persuaders on both ends of Baker's (1999) continuum may profit in today's marketplace. Yet those who observe these ethical thresholds are more likely to enjoy morally sound, long-term relationships with their audiences. Allowing for exceptions, they will also be more likely to predict those mousetraps that will be deemed fittest.

Notes

1. Dedicated to Larry Rasky.
2. Law (2000) reviewed the scientific literature related to plant sterol and stanol margarines. The British Medical Journal Web site that hosts Law's article also includes responses to Law's review.

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