



PUBLIC ACCEPTABILITY – YOU CAN’T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores fast-evolving developments in the way the media operates and the consequent opportunities and challenges they pose for encouraging understanding of safe and reliable transport of radioactive materials.

Successful communication depends critically on four key factors: the message; the consumers of the message; the messenger, and the means by which the message is delivered. By analysing contemporary examples of media coverage we can see how the same story can be told in contradictory ways. Contemporary media technologies amplify the challenges of reaching a growing demographic sector that relies heavily on the new media.

Traditional media outlets – written and electronic – increasingly have their limits in reaching contemporary audiences; how does industry cope? Ultimately the question that resonates is whether we can really judge a book by its cover? This paper will examine how the industry is covered and the challenges and opportunities presented by new messages, messengers and means of communication and most importantly, our audiences.

INTRODUCTION

Ladies and Gentlemen: You can’t judge a book by its cover – or, in the case of the industry we represent, you can’t always judge our story by the way it is covered. I will look at the message, the consumers of the message, the messenger and the means of communication in turn.

THE MESSAGE

First the message. Ours is a good news story. The safe packaging and transport of nuclear materials is absolutely essential to the provision of sustainable, clean, base-load electricity. The recycling of spent nuclear fuel is an outstanding example of sustainability in action – no other fuel offers the possibility of extracting more energy from its spent fuel. And no other fuel today has proven technology, commercially in use, to capture its wastes so efficiently.

There’s more good news – you know it – the packaging and transport of nuclear materials has an outstanding safety record over a half century – with no substantial damage to life or the environment in all that time.

There’s more – no transport sector is subject to such a rigorous transport safety regime of international, modal and national regulation. This fact, combined with the professionalism of the industry has assured this excellent safety record.



There are signs aplenty of growing public acceptance of the importance of nuclear to the overall energy mix – and by extension, the importance of safe packaging and transport of nuclear materials.

But, public acceptance is a fragile flower – it needs constant nurturing - by the witness of continued safe transport, and by dedicated effort to explain what we do. Public acceptance can easily be thrown off course – it cannot be taken for granted.

MEDIA COVERAGE

You can't judge a book by its cover. Two newspapers, same day, coverage of the same story – interim results of a UK bakery chain. The paper on the left reports “Profits on the Rise at Greggs”. The paper on the right reports “Greggs in Crisis”. Which one is right? Can they both be right? Reading into the articles we find there is no dispute about the figures – Greggs saw a rise in profits in the first six months of the year. However, for the bad news report – Greggs is in crisis because sales over the past six weeks were flat. So is Greggs in crisis, or is Greggs basking in a profits rise? It all depends on how the story is covered.

Let's look at a story a little closer to home. In the United States a truck carrying a radioactive cargo is involved in an accident. A drunk driver, travelling in the opposite direction, loses control of his vehicle, crosses the centre median of the highway, and causes an accident for the truck carrying the radioactive cargo. Note carefully, the driver of the radioactive cargo was doing nothing wrong – the accident was caused to him by a drunk driver travelling in the opposite direction. So let's look at how the story was reported.

Here you see three reports of the accident: The one, non-controversially reports that the highway is reopened after a wreck near Sandstone – oh, and by the way, the truck was carrying radioactive material. Another carried the breaking news: “Evacuation Lifted for Sandstone after Radioactive Threat”. A little more alarmist – a radioactive threat. And according to the local television station: “Drunk Driver Caused Accident Involving Radioactive Cargo, Police Say”. Just a minute – a drunk driver caused an accident involving radioactive cargo – was the drunk driving the truck? No – but if you want to find that out, you better pay attention to the whole story.

Same story – different coverage. You can't judge a book by its cover. But our industry is judged by the way it is covered. In fact, while the accident was, of course, bad news, it might have been reported as a kind of good news story – the fact is that the package containing the radioactive material did its job – it remained completely intact. And that is why the evacuation of Sandstone was lifted.

THE PACKAGE

I was on a panel in Nevada a few years ago considering transport aspects of the proposed Yucca Mountain repository. A fellow panellist, a prominent opponent of the Yucca Mountain proposal, cited statistics showing the number of road accidents involving trucks per million miles, and of those, the percentage that had been catastrophic accidents. It followed, therefore – according to him – that one could reasonably deduce that a certain percentage of road transports involving radioactive materials would be involved in an accident, some of those accidents would be catastrophic and, therefore, it was a risk not worth taking. My fellow panelist said nothing about the package.



For my part, I talked mostly about the package and its safety features; the rigorous internationally approved safety test criteria to assure the package would survive realistic regular and accident conditions of transport, and the need to present a convincing safety case to competent authorities before a license would be issued. I did not deny the statistical possibility of transport accidents; more important, however, I suggested, was to focus on the likely consequences of accidents.

This prompted a lady in the audience to raise her hand – Why, she asked, didn't my fellow panellist talk about the safety characteristics of the package – of the fact that safety is vested primarily in the package and not in the transport conveyance? It was the first time, she said, that she had heard anyone talk about the package rather than the conveyance.

Now, it is a basic principle of transport safety regulation that safety is vested primarily in the package, and not the mode of conveyance. I don't think this basic fact is as well known and understood as it should be.

At a major international conference on transport safety, I heard someone who should have known better state that while it was accepted that the maritime transport of radioactive materials had an outstanding safety record, and that the likelihood of a transport accident involving radioactive materials was very small; if, nevertheless, there was such an accident, then the consequences would be catastrophic.

Here again, the concern took no account of the essential difference between the transport conveyance – be it truck, train or ship – and the package. As we know, it simply does not follow that because there could be damage to the conveyance, that the inevitable result would be a serious radiological incident.

CONSUMERS OF THE MESSAGE

This takes me from the message, to the consumers of the message. To be convincing, we must be able to communicate to the intended consumers of our messages in ways that resonate with them. And we can do it – we have a great message to tell: clean, reliable and ample base-load energy for the future. And a safety culture that is second to none.

The opponents of nuclear energy, or those who would impede the necessary transports related to the provision of nuclear energy, don't have a monopoly on virtue. After all, who has a greater stake in safety than those who work within the industry – aren't we every bit as concerned about the safety of our partners, children, and communities?

We have a duty to tailor our messages to our audiences – to be convincing, our messages must resonate with the values, beliefs and feelings which are filters through which our messages are received.

THE MESSENGER

So, then, how and who best to win hearts and minds to the virtues of nuclear packaging and transport? A few years ago, in the United Kingdom, a survey was undertaken to determine whom the British public considered to be the 100 greatest Britons of all time. You can imagine some of



the names – the football superstar David Beckham, Princess Diana, the Beatles. Scientists hardly figured in the top one hundred.

I don't think people place as much trust as they once did in people in authority, including the scientist. I don't know why the non-expert should be trusted more than the expert – but there we are. Perhaps it has something to do with the nature of science wherein the scientist, the engineer, works in a world of empiricism, of facts; but society at large also functions in a world of values, of beliefs and attitudes.

So, don't shoot the messenger – but it is reasonable to expect the messenger to have the skill sets to communicate effectively, always keeping in mind the intended audience, for ultimately it is their voice, not the messenger's that will determine the success of the message. As my father used to say in his shop – the customer is king – ultimately, without an understanding audience we don't have a business.

THE MEDIUM

I've talked about the message, the consumers of the message, and the messenger. Now, let's close the circle and talk about the medium – the vehicle for connecting the message via the messenger to the information consumer. To use a nuclear industry analogy, if the message is the product, the messenger is the consignor, and the consumer is the consignee, the communications medium is the mode of transport.

The communications medium is the vehicle through which a person encounters a particular piece of information. The 1960s communications guru, Marshall McLuhan, famously said that the medium is the message. Basically, he was saying that the means of communication would have an effect on the individual's understanding of the message.

So, while our communications departments are churning out press releases, and arranging interviews with journalists - who exactly is reading the newspapers and the trade journals? In the case of the trade journals it is obvious; the industry is talking to itself. There's nothing wrong with that but it is not part of a winning hearts and minds strategy.

So what about the newspapers and mainstream electronic media? Just who is reading the newspapers anyway? Do a survey among your staff – ask them who reads a newspaper on a daily basis? Include the staff in your communications department in the survey. You may be surprised by the findings. In my experience there is scarcely anyone under the age of 35 who daily reads a newspaper.

Now the world is not run exclusively by the under-35s, but the future is theirs. We cannot ignore the traditional print and electronic media; but we cannot put all our messages in that basket.

I think we live in a rather sceptical age; we certainly live in a 24-7 communications age wherein people increasingly rely on the 10 second sound bite for their information. Do you remember 30 years ago when the average advertisement on television was 60 seconds – now it is more like 15 seconds. People often don't seem to have the patience to follow a lengthy reasoned argument.



It is not even the age of television news channels anymore – the new media: the internet, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, text messages, are the latest thing. The young people who organise and join in the protests aren't responding to some ad in the newspaper – they are texting each other; leaving 140 word maximum messages on Twitter.

Take the example of the American presidential election in 2008. Mr. Obama reportedly raised hundreds of millions of dollars through a harvest of small donations over the internet. He did, however, spend a considerable amount of this money raised on advertising on the mainstream television networks. So he didn't ignore the traditional media altogether. In first announcing his choice for vice presidential running mate, Mr. Obama chose to sidestep the traditional media by sending a telephone text message to his army of internet supporters.

How good are we in a mature, specialised and technical industry at monitoring the new media to understand what the emerging generation are thinking and saying, and how they are saying it? How good are we at communicating to them through the media they value, in ways that they appreciate? How good are we at crafting our communications messages in ways that are convincing to them?

WNTI

Effective public communications about the essential services your companies provide, and your outstanding safety record in a highly regulated industry is a major priority for the World Nuclear Transport Institute I represent. The World Nuclear Transport Institute, or WNTI as it is known, represents around fifty companies worldwide committed to, or reliant on, the safe, efficient and reliable packaging and transport of radioactive materials of all kinds. Our members represent companies involved in all aspects of the fuel cycle – from uranium mining to spent nuclear fuel management, with everything in between including fuel fabrication and package design and manufacturing, and transport operations including radiation protection, emergency preparedness and response, interface between industry and authorities, shipping options and public communications.

Our ability to communicate our member companies' interests is strengthened to the extent that industry's voice is heard as one. And so, we devote considerable effort, through a network of industry working groups within the WNTI, to exchange information, concerns and ideas, based on operational experience, and then to attempt to develop consolidated industry positions that we then can carry forward to our participation in meetings with the other major stakeholders such as intergovernmental organisations and national competent authorities.

We are engaged with national competent authorities, modal organisations, port and harbour authorities, and liner services in promoting acceptance of safe, effective and reliable transport. We provide a dedicated service to our member companies through what we call a "Knowledge Base" which is a databank of up-to-date information, expressed in simple terms, on everything from radiation protection requirements, to insurance and liability, to segregation distances, to assist in their communications with service providers.

CONCLUSIONS

Ladies and gentlemen. We've got a very good news story. The nuclear industry, and its packaging and transport sectors, are at the forefront of leading edge technology – offering enormous hope to



respond to one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century – the provision of abundant, reliable, and clean, base-load energy. We are presented with the opportunity to be every bit as leading edge in embracing the communications opportunities of the 21st century to get our story across. Let us then look to the future in our messages, with our messengers, our audiences and our means of communicating with them. The public deserves no less – the industry deserves no less.