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DK or DE? The Two Deficiencies

Business consultant Don Beveridge teaches managers how to distinguish between two common deficiencies in employee performance. Within this lesson are valuable guidelines for public interest groups planning a media campaign.

The last time I heard Don Beveridge, I was managing a division of NewCity Communications, a radio company, and Don was the keynote speaker at our annual retreat in Orlando. He told the assembled managers a story about two account executives who worked at the same radio station selling commercial time. Neither salesman was going to reach his quarterly goal, and their manager was attributing their lackluster performance to the same problem. He urged both men to “spend less time in the office and more time with customers.”

Had he looked more closely, Beveridge explained, the sales manager would have recognized two very different problems. One salesman, who had lived in the area a relatively short time, simply didn’t know enough about the local market to identify and cultivate qualified prospects. His problems stemmed from a “deficiency of knowledge,” or DK. The other salesman, a ten-year station veteran, had an enviable list of long-term clients. He had become reluctant, however, to press them for more

business when their orders began to drop off. His problem was DE: “deficiency of execution.” Clearly, these two problems required different responses from the sales manager, which brought Beveridge to the moral of his story: distinguishing DK from DE can be a critical first step towards more effective management.

Ten years later, I attended a meeting in Los Angeles where the subject - household hazardous waste - seemed as distant from Beveridge’s speech as California is from Florida. By the end of the meeting, however, I was struck by the relevance of Beveridge’s lesson to public interest work. The household hazardous waste campaign our team was planning illustrates the importance of distinguishing DK from DE when communicating with the public.

First, a bit of background: the average home has about 100 pounds of household hazardous waste (or HHW). Half-empty paint cans, dust-covered containers of oven cleaner, and other toxic substances forgotten under sinks, stuffed away in closets, or banished to the garage all fall into this category.

The LA County Department of Public Works conducts regular “round-ups” to gather and properly dispose of this potentially poisonous waste, but public participation has been disappointing. Fortunately, research on the target audience - the so-called “neat neighbors” who take pride in their homes and community - had turned up an important point: “.people don’t want a lengthy discussion about the problem or the process of the problem. They want to know how it impacts them and, in simple terms, what they can do conveniently to fix it.” *In short: the problem of lackluster participation in round-ups isn’t DK. It’s DE.*

That’s an important distinction. Now, rather than wasting time and money on a campaign that would tell homeowners what they already know (and don’t want to hear), the media team can focus on moving the target to action. Addressing this particular DE problem, however, triggers another set of questions. Do homeowners let HHW accumulate because they don’t know where to take it? Are they just too busy, or is some other factor standing in their way? And exactly what motivated the select few who *did* appear at the round-ups? Answering these questions



may require another round of research, but that investment should pay off in a campaign that speaks directly to the problem: neat neighbor DE.

Beveridge’s management tool may save time and money for you, too. If you’re contemplating a media campaign, first, determine if your problem is primarily a deficiency of knowledge or execution. If it’s DK, you can follow the traditional track for most public education campaigns (i.e., presenting the issue in a way that your audience can easily understand its importance and relevance to them.) If the problem is DE, you can bypass the education step, but you’ll have to learn why your audience is not converting their knowledge into action. With that information in hand, you can start planning a campaign that will speak directly to this problem.

Of course, some problems are a combination of DK and DE, or in plain English, “They don’t know and they don’t care.” In those cases, your challenge will be two-fold. You may also encounter a DE problem where the barrier between knowledge and action cannot be crossed by any media-inspired conceptual leap (e.g., people with HHW who don’t have cars cannot drive to round-ups, and public transportation doesn’t permit the

conveyance of HHW.) Nevertheless, asking the question “Are we dealing with DK or DE?” should be a useful first step in planning a campaign and ensuring that your message is pointed at the relevant problem.

For more information about Don Beveridge, go to www.leadingauthorities.com and enter Don’s full name in the speaker search.

free-range follow-up

Keeping it Simple

Last month’s issue covered five factors affecting the speed at which an idea will diffuse, and factor #3 - complexity - is worth revisiting. In *Diffusion of Innovations* Everett Rogers asserts that the easier an idea is to understand, the faster it will catch on. In his marketing manual, *The New Positioning*, Jack Trout makes a similar point regarding the formulation of your messages, whether they are about your organization as a whole, a specific program, or a particular product:

“If there’s any trick to finding that simple set of words, I’d say it’s one of being ruthless about how you edit the story you want to tell. Anything that others could claim as well as you can, eliminate. Anything that requires a complex analysis to prove, forget. Anything that doesn’t fit with your perceptions, avoid. The lesson here is not to try to tell your entire story. Just focus on one powerful attribute and drive it into the mind.”

Or as I like to ask clients when working on an advertisement, brochure, or other piece of public communication: “If people remembered just one thing after seeing this, what should it be?”

free-range thinking™ is written by Andy Goodman.

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To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 464-3956 or send an email to andy@thegoodmancenter.com.

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