

FIELD GUIDE FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

National Media & Competitive Enterprise Institute

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FOREWORD

Robert Novak

When I appear on the lecture circuit, I often am asked how I can manage at least two afternoons a week on CNN's "Crossfire" to sit across the table from James Carville and Paul Begala and take abuse from them. I usually reply with a wisecrack, saying that CNN pays me handsomely to undergo that travail. Unserious though it is, that answer tends to confirm the premise of my questioners that this is less than an enchanting experience for me.

In fact, it isn't. Day after day, I find myself on the defensive to defend myself and my beliefs from a panoply of accusations: Why do you want to poison water and air? Don't you put the interests of corporate business over that of the people? Why deprive poor children of needed nutrition? How can you justify tax cuts for the rich that they do not need? What is the justification for control of government by big business at the expense of the poor?

It does not really matter that these accusatory questions are grounded in quicksand. Carville and Begala have developed a mantra based on attack, attack and then attack again. They have written and continue to write little books that are really attack manuals, which clearly are being

used by left-wing politicians and activists. That is why this Communications Field Guide is so valuable in providing guidance to deal with the Carville-Begala onslaught.

I must admit that, as a conservative journalist who has been trained to see both sides of any story, I often feel frustrated in dealing with my obsessive antagonists. Like the French in 1940, I find my Maginot Line defenses outflanked by Carville and Begala.

Politicians and corporate officers frequently find themselves in the same uncomfortable posture as I do. We all have found ourselves in the position of while knowing that the policies of freedom are beneficial to all people, we are categorized as narrow-minded, selfish champions of special business interests. All of us can be grateful for this field manual.

I am not personally familiar with all the participants in the daylong workshop that led to this publication, but those that I do know are more than a match for the street fighters of the left. Fred L. Smith Jr. of the Competitive Enterprise Institute and Alex Castellanos of National Media, who led the workshop, are eagerly sought by “Crossfire’s” producers as occupants of the program’s “right-wing” guest seat. So is Clifford May, an experienced journalist and political publicist. They all give much harder than they get. I have known Don Devine for thirty years as a brilliant political strategist. I have had contact with Herb Berkowitz as one of Washington’s most skilled public relations purveyors.

In their introduction, Smith and Castellanos point out that “the free market policy community,” trying to “be taken seriously in the world of ideas,” aims most of its arguments at “intellectual elites” and ignores a larger population. “Our failure to engage the public is dangerous because populist traditions flourish in the United States,” the authors add. Thus, this is a primer for engaging ordinary people.

It is a fascinating but not quick read, a mind-bending exercise on how to get to the public the free market message which relies for its cultural underpinning on the late political scientist Aaron Wildavsky, whose work has guided many of those who participated in the workshop. Wildavsky’s “cultural values” theory is a basis for figuring how to get the message of freedom through to people who do not consciously regard freedom at the apex of their values.

In putting forth his “political values theory,” Alex Castellanos asks how it is possible to “present freedom” and gives this answer: “My goal is not to be less conservative, not to love freedom less, not to hop over on the left and make that occasional compromise. My goal is to say if you are really conservative, if you really believe, then you’re not only

doing what’s right, you’re not only doing what’s economically better, you’re doing what works better and helps more people.”

The recommendation by Castellanos is to “always start on offense.” He and his colleague, Will Feltus, project that offensive one step further: “The way liberals sell to the right regulating business we could sell regulating government.”

Make no mistake, however. This is not an easy task. Don Devine cautions: “When you start reaching, you worry about losing your base.” Cliff May says: “Always keep in mind that whoever is explaining is, in the end, losing.”

Public relations counselor Nick Nichols has two big pieces of advice for corporate America. First, stop trying to “turn a serious problem into silk,” because “people will see through it.” Second, stop appeasing trial lawyers, environmental groups, or any adversary. “Every time a company agrees to roll over and give New York state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer 10 million bucks in order to have him stop chasing them, it tells the consumer that the company did something wrong.”

Indeed, Herb Berkowitz sees basic defeatism within American industry. When a client tells him from the start to prepare a “fallback position,” he concludes that “their ultimate goal was to lose.” But Berkowitz goes on to warn: “What ‘sells’ with our good right-wing friends isn’t necessarily something that’s going to turn around a liberal journalist.”

Careful study and implementation of the Communications Field Guide might produce more effective spokesmen on the right appearing on “Crossfire” to assist me. Conceivably, it might even help me do a little better in confronting Carville and Begala.

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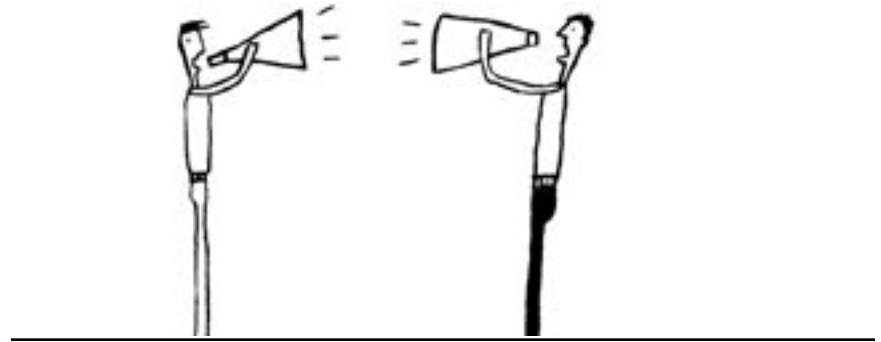
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In addition to the presenters who volunteered their time to take part in the value-based communication workshop that led to this field guide, we wish to thank the following: Jody Clarke, for her efforts in organizing the conference and managing the production of this guide; Brendon Swedlow, who understands perhaps more than anyone Aaron Wildavsky's cultural values theory, for his editing expertise; Liz Jones, Anne Duke, and Deborah Haynes, also for their editorial assistance; and Erin Brophy and Carol Wingfield, for the graphic design and layout of the book.

We would be remiss in not expressing our gratitude as well to Robert Novak, one of the country's most well-known and respected journalists, for writing the foreword.

Finally, the conference would not have happened without the vision of two people who have long realized the need for a values-based communication approach in the conservative-classical liberal movement: Gregory Conko and Sam Kazman. We are grateful for their contributions, and to all who understand the importance of what we are trying to accomplish.



INTRODUCTION

Fred L. Smith Jr. & Alex Castellanos

The free market community has long been engaged in waging the war of ideas. It has never fully realized, however, that winning this war requires an effective communications strategy that reaches relevant publics, in addition to having good policy to promote. Part of the reason the free market community has failed to translate its ideas into policy victories is because it does not communicate as well as its ideological combatants do. We have had good products; however, we have not marketed them well at all.

The political world is the world of rational ignorance. People have few reasons to spend their time learning the nuances of complex policy questions because they believe they can do very little about them. People are rational. They spend time familiarizing themselves with things about which they can do something. In politics, people aren't ignorant because they're stupid; they're ignorant because they're smart; and if we insist on turning them into policy wonks, then we are being stupid!

The free market policy community has been intent on earning its intellectual spurs, in an effort to be taken seriously in the world of ideas.

We aim the bulk of our arguments at the intellectual elites (the “chattering class”), a group that is ideologically predisposed to reject these arguments. The public has ignored any efforts to bring the debate to a larger population, as it is rational for the average person to ignore arguments among policy wonks. Given the populist traditions that flourish in this country, our failure to engage the public is dangerous.

To address these problems, CEI and National Media brought together a group of communications experts to discuss practical tools that policy analysts and others in the conservative-classical liberal movement may use to communicate better to ideologically opposed elites and the broader public. These communications efforts are critical, though they have often been neglected in the past. Too often, free marketers have spoken in a language suitable to persuading others with similar values, but have ignored the egalitarian “fairness” arguments that have proved to be more persuasive to liberal elites. Only occasionally have the populist arguments critical to humanizing the intellectual debate been addressed. There are exceptions. For example, the Institute of Justice’s creative efforts to frame their debates in terms appropriate for mass consumption are very impressive. But, in general, policy groups have used language suitable to persuading elites with similar values. We hope to address this problem in this guide, which is a distillation of the presentations made at our communications workshop.

We hope you will gain some valuable insight that you can apply in your work, whether you’re a public relations professional, businessperson, policy analyst, or anyone who is interested in learning how to spread the free market philosophy more effectively.



1

THE VALUE OF COMMUNICATING TO JOE AND JOAN “CITIZEN”

Fred L. Smith Jr.

Michael Kelly, the columnist for *The Washington Post* who was tragically killed during the Iraqi war, had many good lines, one of which is relevant to improving political communication. He started his career as a television journalist and was doing quite well. But one day he quit. He was later asked, “Why did you leave? It seemed like such a promising career.” He replied, “Well, yeah, but one of my co-hosts said to me one day, ‘Michael, you just don’t get it. In television journalism a hair dryer is every bit as important as a pad and pencil.’” While that comment prompted Michael to leave broadcast journalism, his story brings up an important point: The way we present ourselves is as important as the content of our messages.

CEI and National Media work very closely with many businesses, trying to persuade them not to apologize for being capitalists. That work is important because industry is a significant channel of political communications.

Corporations spend more than half a trillion dollars a year selling