The "Sugar Tax" Fight

Ricky Telg

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The "Sugar Tax" Fight

Abstract
The purpose of this case study was to examine the impact that environmental activism can have on agriculture by focusing on the Florida sugar industry's reaction during the 1996 “sugar tax” amendment campaign. During the campaign, proponents and opponents of the three proposed Everglades-related amendments to the Florida Constitution spent more than $40 million to sway the public. As a result of the public relations and political campaigns, communicators from Florida agricultural industries realized that they must increase their efforts to project a positive public image.
sion identified age, interest in osteoporosis, and use of soy because it is a good source of calcium, while the third regression found age, interest in breast cancer and interest in cholesterol to be the best group of variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression</th>
<th>Parameter Estimate</th>
<th>Set of Variables*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 + Soy Consumption + Age + Interest in Menopause - Interest in Cholesterol + Interest in Osteoporosis</td>
<td>.0006 .0001 .0029 .0017 .0300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 + Age + Interest in Osteoporosis - Soy as Source of Calcium</td>
<td>.0011 .0077 .0083</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 + Age + Interest in Breast Cancer - Interest in Cholesterol</td>
<td>.0001 .0001 .0127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Independent variables: gender, ethnicity, age, education level, income level, soy consumption/frequency, disease interests with regard to soy, diet, and motives for consuming or not consuming soy.

Statistically significant differences between the two groups with regard to the above mentioned variables are presented in Table 4. The WNU group was significantly older (p .001), consumed less soy (p .001), soy milk (p .001), tempeh (p .05) and tofu (p .001), and had less interest in menopause compared to the WU group (p .001).

Ranking was done of the outside links most frequently used to access the SHH AE feature during the month of January in 1997, 1998 and 1999, by using the data in the referrer log on the StratSoy Statistics Page (StratSoy, 1999) (Table 5). Analysis does not include searches done using various search engines.

Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to examine the impact that environmental activism can have on agriculture by focusing on the Florida sugar industry’s reaction during the 1996 “sugar tax” amendment campaign. During the campaign, proponents and opponents of the three proposed Everglades-related amendments to the Florida Constitution spent more than $40 million to sway the public. As a result of the public relations and political campaigns, communicators from Florida agricultural industries realized that they must increase their efforts to project a positive public image.

One hundred years ago, south Florida was considered by most to be a wasteland of mud, muck, and mosquitoes — a malarial swamp better left alone. The population of south Florida was approximately 23,000, most of whom were clustered along the Atlantic Coast. Land suitable for housing construction was scarce due to periodic and systematic flooding. Following serious hurricanes in 1926 and 1928, the federal government authorized the United States Army Corps of Engineers to create a massive system of canals, boats, dikes, and levees. This ambitious engineering project created 1.3 million acres for urban use, much of which is now the Miami/Dade metro area. Two million acres were set aside as the Everglades National Park; one million acres were designated as the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) (Florida Crystals, 1997).

Ricky Telg is an assistant professor in the University of Florida’s Department of Agricultural Education and Communication. He has been an ACE member for seven years.
Today the one million acres of the EAA contain some of the most fertile farmland in the nation, much of which supports the largest producers of sugar in the country. This same area has also captured the attention of environmentalists and nature lovers around the world. As the scientific community continues to discover the ecological importance of the Everglades, it also discovers that run-off from farms, as well as the very existence of the farms, may threaten water quality in south Florida as well as the health of the remaining Everglades. As a result of these findings, many environmental activists began to attribute most or all of the Everglades’ woes to sugar farming practices, without significant mention of the ecological impact of the Miami/Dade metro area. In response, sugar farmers contended not only that it is impossible to blame all of the environmental damage on their industry (they assert that their level of responsibility can not be determined scientifically), but also that it is a grave injustice to ignore the negative impact of the urban population residing on what used to be the Everglades itself.

In 1996, the issue finally was contested when a small but well-funded environmental activist group named Save Our Everglades Committee (SOE) authored three proposed amendments to the Florida Constitution. The committee collected enough signatures to place the proposals on the November 1996 ballot and began a campaign aimed at voters in support of the amendments (U.S. Sugar Corporation, 1997). The Florida sugar industry spent $24 million – and by some reports, an estimated $30 million (The Tampa Tribune, 1996) – and the Save Our Everglades Committee (SOE) spent over $14 million on the most expensive public relations campaign in the state’s history (Marcus, 1997). The three proposed amendments were as follow:

- Amendment Four: if passed, this amendment would put a penny-a-pound tax on all sugar grown in Florida. If passed, it has been estimated that sugar farmers would have had to pay $1 billion (U.S. Sugar Corporation, 1997).

- Amendment Five: this proposed amendment, commonly known as the “polluters pay” amendment, stated that those in the Everglades Agricultural Area who cause water pollution within the Everglades Protection area or the Everglades Agricultural Area shall be prima-

questions regarding soy consumption were set up. Question 41 concerning soy use was a yes/no question; questions 42-44 were answered only by soy users; and question 45 was answered only by those who do not use soy. Thus, the first regression analysis was conducted minus questions 42-45; the second regression analysis was performed without questions 41 and 45; and the third analysis was done excluding questions 41-44. As shown in Table 3, the first regression found that the best set of variables to predict “Use of the Website” were soy consumption, age, interest in menopause, interest in cholesterol, and interest in osteoporosis. The second regres-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2 Additional StratSoy Evaluation by Website Users from The WU Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Found the site by search/links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have visited the site more than once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit the site once a day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit once or twice a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit once or twice a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit once or twice a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend less than 5 minutes at the site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend 5 to 10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend 10 to 15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend 15 to 20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spend more than 20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not visited the site more than once because too busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not visited because did not find the information useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have never subscribed to the site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not subscribed because did not know they could subscribe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribe to get all Q&amp;A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribe to avoid visiting the website daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stopped subscribing to not flood in Box</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have looked through archives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who did not look through archives said because too time consuming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have asked one question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have asked two questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who never asked a question did not have a question to ask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said question was answered by looking in archives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey responses for the Web site evaluation are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Data from identical question results are compared between the WNU and WU groups in Table 1, and the additional data that were collected from the WU group are presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WNU</th>
<th>WU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>44% office access to Internet</td>
<td>49% home access to Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30% home access</td>
<td>44% office access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73% never visited before because they had never heard of website</td>
<td>All participants were explicitly directed to the website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94% would ask a question of the expert if they had one</td>
<td>74% have asked the expert a question in the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85% would look in archives first before asking the expert their question</td>
<td>62% looked in archives before asking the expert their question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive aspects: easy to use; vast amount of information; AE feature</td>
<td>Positive aspects: vast amount of information; AE feature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative aspects: too slow; lack of organization; too much information</td>
<td>Negative aspects: lack of organization; too slow; no practical information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions: organize by subject; more practical information; FAQ; add search engine</td>
<td>Suggestions: better organization; faster server; more practical information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78% think FAQ would greatly improve website</td>
<td>86% think nutritional analysis of soyfoods would greatly improve website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73% think searchable database would</td>
<td>84% think searchable database would</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three separate regression analyses were performed on the variable “Use of the Website” because of the way the survey rily responsible” for paying the costs of cleanup (Kleindienst, 1997).

- Amendment Six: this amendment was designed to establish a state trust fund reserved for Everglades cleanup.

This case study will examine the impact that environmental activism can have on agriculture by focusing on the Florida sugar industry’s reaction during the 1996 “sugar tax” amendment campaign.

**Literature Review**

L. Grunig (1992) described an activist group as “two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics, or force” (p. 505). Not only do activist groups attempt to influence other publics, but members of activist groups contribute to the constraints on a given organization’s autonomy and bring about the need for public relations efforts (J. Grunig, 1989). It is in trying to maintain as much control over itself as possible that an organization must constantly monitor its environment for relevant publics with special attention paid to those that may be active or antagonistic (L. Grunig, 1992). When monitoring publics for potential negativism, the public relations practitioner should remember that not all constraints on an organization’s autonomy come directly from an activist group. Activist groups may also pressure government officials to support legislative regulation (J. Grunig, 1989).

The process of monitoring publics is an ongoing one for an organization. Knowing how publics perceive an organization, as well as how to reach those publics (L. Grunig, 1992) is essential for public relations studies that focus on proactive interaction rather than situational crisis management. In order to be more exact when addressing the issue of interaction between an organization and its publics, it is helpful to think in terms of J. Grunig’s (in Lindeborg, 1994) four models of public relations. He was able to identify and define four distinct ways in which public relations is practiced: J. Grunig’s Four Models of Public Relations Practice —

1. Press Agentry — produces favorable publicity, especially in the mass media, with little regard to ethics or outside input.
2. Public Information — disseminates relatively objective information through mass media and controlled media with little input from outside groups.

3. Two-way Asymmetrical — uses research to develop persuasive communication in an effort to control the message.

4. Two-way Symmetrical — uses research and makes use of communication to manage conflict and improve understanding with strategic publics.

A given organization may practice more than one model at a time; the models are not discreet. Being able to recognize the models when they are practiced makes it easier to evaluate and compare public relations efforts.

One mistake an organization can make when taking an inventory of its publics is underestimating an activist group because its membership is small. Olson argued that smaller groups have an advantage over larger groups because smaller groups tend to perform more efficiently than larger groups and that they seem to have wider support than they actually have. He concluded that smaller special interest groups have disproportionate power (in L. Grunig, 1992). J. Grunig (1989) pointed out that in large groups, it is normal for members to assume that someone else will take over for them if their efforts are lacking; in smaller groups members realize that they must do their fair share or no one else will.

An additional consideration for an organization when evaluating an activist group is what motivates people to become a member of such a group. J. Grunig (1989) established a situational theory of publics that begins with the assumption that publics form around specific situations or issues produced by the consequences that organizations have on people outside the organization. He stated that people seldom seek information about situations that they do not feel has an impact on them. Organizations, therefore, should keep in mind that individuals often join activist groups to get information about and take action on topics they are interested in; this can help guide organizations in tailoring their messages to various publics (J. Grunig, 1989).

L. Grunig (1992) developed a series of conclusions about the impact and interaction between an organization and its parameter estimates (which shows a positive or negative relationship between the dependent and independent variables) was reported along with the p values from Wald’s test (p ≤ .05 was considered statistically significant). The Wilcoxon 2 Sample Test (non-parametric) was used to compare the scores (or ranks) of two independent groups and test whether the distribution of the scores (ranks) was equal or unequal. Since the data sampling was not randomly drawn, due to the nature of the Web site and the access to information about respondents, it would be prudent not to extrapolate the data found in this study to a general population, though the method would have relevance and use for specific sites.

Selection and writing of FAQs

An FAQ section was added to the Web site during the course of this study, both to facilitate the dissemination of SHH information and to decrease the number of repeat questions submitted to the AE feature. The following FAQ topics were those deemed to be of most concern to the WU group and were chosen based on the number of questions submitted to the AE feature as well as the latest research findings regarding soy and human health: Breast Cancer, Cholesterol, Colon Cancer, Haelan, Isoflavones, Lecithin, Menopause, Osteoporosis, Practical Tips, Prostate Cancer, Recipes, Soy Allergy, Soy Infant Formula, Soy Protein Quality, Soy Safety, and Soyfoods. Analysis of the number of hits to individual FAQs (which were set up as fact sheets) was conducted using information in the StratSoy Statistics Page (StratSoy, 1999). Analysis of the number of times responses referred to individual FAQs after their implementation was done by analyzing the text of responses to submitted questions.

Results

Of the 895 E-mails sent out, 164 were sent to E-mail addresses which were found to be no longer valid (more than one attempt was made to send the E-mail) and therefore the original message was presumed to have never been received. A total of 731 remaining users should have received the original letter. Of these, 50 users completed the surveys for a final response (messages sent/surveys completed) rate of 6.84%. Of the 165 E-mails/letters sent out to the WNU group, eight were invalid addresses, reducing the total to 157. A total of 48 surveys were completed for a response rate of 30.57%.
Part 3 addressed general dietary information and the consumption of soyfoods. The WNU survey consisted of 31 questions and was identical to the WU survey regarding demographics and dietary information but contained fewer questions regarding the StratSoy Web site. Questions concerning dietary changes made in response to StratSoy use were omitted.

The WU group consisted of individuals who asked the expert a question (705), plus those who subscribed to the discussion group at the time (164), or had previously subscribed (26), for a total population of 895. Since the only information available for the WU group were E-mail addresses, this was the method of contact. The E-mail sent to this group explained the research being done, and requested that individuals participate by going to a Web site on the Internet and filling out the survey. Three weeks were given to complete the survey and five random $100 prizes were provided as an incentive for those completing the entire survey.

The WNU population consisted of 81 postmenopausal women who participated in a clinical trial investigating the effect of soy on bone density (Potter, Baum, Teng, Stillman, Shay, & Erdman, 1998), plus 84 men who had participated in a clinical trial regarding the minimal amount of soy protein needed to lower cholesterol (Teixeira, Potter, Weigel, Hannum, Erdman, & Hasler, in press). Both clinical trials were conducted at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. E-mail addresses were available for the majority of the men and none of the women. Thus, contact was made via both E-mail and regular mail. Participants were first-time Web site visitors only. Those respondents without access to a computer filled out the Web survey (with staff assistance if necessary) in Program office.

**Statistics**

Statistical analyses were calculated using SPSS® (SPSS, 1998) and SAS® (SAS, 1989) software. The Maximum Likelihood Method was used because of the testing of more than one variable (Freund, 1997); Wald’s test was performed to test whether the parameter estimates were significantly different from zero (Wald, 1943). Stepwise selection was used to reduce the number of variables in the model; and the Goodness of Fit Test was done to determine whether the model fit the data (Stokes, Davis, & Koch, 1995). The sign of the
promoting an organization in a positive environmental light. Those principles are: **S. S. Vandervoort's Four Generic Principles of Promoting** —

1. Make the environmental policy real.
2. Get out in front of the issues.
3. Go beyond compliance.
4. Communicate your actions.

She also recommended including representatives from opposing groups (i.e. community action groups, environmental activists, and political/regulatory officials) on environmental communications teams. While management may be very uncomfortable at the thought of including outsiders on a team designed to address sensitive environmental issues, Vandervoort (1991) maintains that history has proven that the earlier an organization incorporates opposing or outside perspectives, the earlier it can anticipate potentially serious problems.

**The Fight**

For several months before Election Day in November 1996, Florida voters were the targets of television and radio advertisements, direct-mail pieces, persuasive phone calls, and door-to-door campaigning — all related to the proposed amendments. The sugar industry, which is composed of two large corporations, a farming cooperative, and numerous small, independent farmers, was unprepared to face a serious challenge from a well-organized activist group. In addition, the industry was surprised by early polls that indicated widespread public support for the measures.

The sugar industry considered the proposed amendments a threat to its very existence. Seldom if ever before had a single agricultural commodity been singled out as "primarily responsible" for nonpoint-source pollution (pollution that is not the result of a direct, detectable environmental accident or contamination). One sugar industry statement said that "there are few times in the life of a business when one event can have a literal life-or-death impact; for U. S. Sugar (Corporation) and the Florida sugar industry, the threat of the $1 billion tax was such an event" (U. S. Sugar Corporation, 1997 [on-line]).

archived via bulletin board postings, and users can receive all questions and answers via E-mail by subscribing to a mailing list.

The SHH AE section is among the most heavily used topic areas/discussion groups. Of the number of messages exchanged in discussion groups from October 1997 to September 1998, the SHH section had the highest (1303) followed by Swine Management & Nutrition (845), Soybean Utilization (668), Grain Marketing (636), Soybean Production (408), and Farm Business Management & Marketing (224) (Thompson & Khanna, 1998). Interest in the SHH AE section is likely due to the explosion of interest in the role of soy in human health within the last decade (Messina & Erdman, 1995; Messina & Erdman, 1998).

The objectives of this research were to assess the use of the SHH AE feature through analysis of the demographics of those visiting the Web site and other information gathered from two surveys, examine respondent attitudes about soy-related topics to help guide the development of a "frequently asked questions" section (FAQ) and improve the information dissemination process on the Web site based on the results of this research. In essence, this research represents an example of how to use an Internet-based communications system to disseminate scientific information on soy and human health and how to improve that system based on users' feedback.

**Method**

Two Web-based surveys were designed to address the research objectives: (1) a Web site User [WU] survey for individuals who were already familiar with the StratSoy Web site and; (2) a Web site Non-User [WNU] survey intended for people who were totally unfamiliar with the Web site. The WNU group consisted of men and women who had participated in soyfoods clinical trials at the University of Illinois. The surveys were set up on the Internet at two separate URLs and the password for access to the surveys were included in the E-mail/letter sent to potential respondents (see below).

**Survey design and data collection**

The WU Survey consisted of three parts containing a total of 51 questions. Part 1 consisted of questions related to demographics. Part 2 addressed StratSoy use and evaluation, and
dissemination process on the Web site based on the results of this research. Study participants were 50 Web site users and 48 people who were unfamiliar with the site. The results of the study indicated specific areas of interest and additional Web site features desired by the respondents. The findings identified specific areas that may be targeted to improve the Web site.

StratSoy (Strategic Soybean System - http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~stratsoy/new/), which is funded in part by the United Soybean Board (USB), is a state-of-the-art, Web-based information and communications system created in 1994 by researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in cooperation with Texas A&M University. The overall goal of StratSoy is to promote informed decision making by the United States soybean industry in order to improve its effectiveness, efficiency and profitability. A vast amount of information related to soybean production, marketing and use is posted on the StratSoy system and is available to all StratSoy users.

Use of StratSoy has increased dramatically from about 700,000 hits to the Web site in 1997 to almost 1,300,000 in 1998 (StratSoy, 1999). The system is used by soybean producers, consumers, policy makers and researchers, among others. StratSoy is visited by an increasing number of users from around the world, with visits from over 130 countries (Thompson & Khanna, 1998). The wealth of information that can be found on StratSoy includes news from the USB, the National Soybean Research Laboratory and state association offices; market information; agricultural legislation updates; weather data and maps; soybean genome information; and discussion groups (StratSoy, 1999).

Web users can use the StratSoy "Ask an Expert" (AE) feature (now under the heading of "Soybean Answers" on the Web site) to submit a question to experts in 13 different areas including grain market analysis, soybean utilization, field crop diseases, seed quality information, soybean production/management, and soy and human health (SHH) (StratSoy, 1999). Discussion group question-and-answer exchanges are

For two months, the public relations battle continued, with each side of the argument accusing the other of distorting facts and deceiving the public. On November 6, Amendment Four was defeated, while Amendments Five and Six passed. Although the second two amendments passed, the sugar industry claimed the victory since the penny-per-pound tax was voted down.

### How the Sugar Industry Conducted Its Campaign

Both sides of the issue spent a vast quantity of money on a wide variety of media. One of the primary strategies of the sugar industry was to finance a political action group called Citizens to Save J obs and Stop Unwanted Taxes (CSJ SUT). Even the selection of the name for this group was strategic in that it played on voters’ aversion to taxes and fear of unemployment. An essential strategy of the sugar industry was to focus all of its media time and attention on Amendment Four, the penny-per-pound tax amendment. Little mention was made of the other two amendments, which may explain why they passed.

Over the course of the campaign, the sugar industry responded to being referred to as “Big Sugar” (a derogatory term) by attacking the founders of SOE. The industry referred to chairperson Mary barley as “a millionaire land development heiress” and to financial supporter Paul Tudor Jones as a “mega-wealthy Connecticut commodities broker” (U.S. Sugar Corporation, 1997 [on-line]). CSJ SUT aired television and radio advertising, portraying employees of the South Florida Water Management District (the regulatory agency with primary jurisdiction over the Everglades) as bureaucrats with a reputation for squandering public money on luxuries such as limousines and jet planes. This particular advertisement provoked then-Governor Lawton Chiles (who had remained quiet about the amendments issues thus far) to write a letter to CSJ SUT, chastising it for intentionally damaging the reputation of the water management district’s employees (Marcus, 1997).

In mailers sent to the homes of Floridians, CSJ SUT referred to the proposed sugar tax as a “food tax.” The mailer told voters that if the proposed amendment passed, they would wind up paying a tax on a food item - sugar - and would “give the politicians the power to raise property taxes hundreds of millions of dollars” (Citizens to Save J obs and Stop Unfair
Taxes, 1996, p. 1). The mailer’s assertions resulted in a letter from State Attorney Lawson Lamar. He wrote, “It is my strong recommendation that no further misleading materials be distributed to the public and that a statement correcting the misinformation in this document be included in your upcoming campaign mailings or other communications with the public” (Kleindienst, 1997 [on-line]).

According to Barbara Miedema (1997), manager of public relations for the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, the campaign that the sugar industry ran began as a direct response to SOE television advertisements that personally attacked farmers and farming advocates. In addition, every commercial released by the sugar industry was tested before focus groups before it was approved. Miedema said, “During the last stage of the campaign, daily tracking took place so we could react quickly in response to circumstances shaping public opinion. Public opinion research gave us the road map; kept us focused on our goals and on message; and helped measure the campaign’s effectiveness” (Miedema, 1997, p. 6).

The sugar industry also distributed a number of press releases geared toward informing the public about the progress the sugar industry had made toward cleaning up farm runoff. The message conveyed in several of the releases (that phosphorus levels in farm water had been reduced by 68% in just three years of voluntary management practices) was well-received by the mass media. In addition, just two weeks before the election, the start of the sugar harvest was delayed so that almost 2,000 employees could go door-to-door and personally ask communities to vote “no” (U.S. Sugar Corporation, 1997 [on-line]).

Discussion

The interaction between the sugar industry and the Save Our Everglades Committee will serve as a point of reference for Florida’s agricultural communicators over the next several years. In many ways, the conflict between the sugar industry and SOE followed behaviors predicted by the literature on public relations and activism. As mentioned earlier, small activist groups are often more effective than larger ones. This was obviously the case concerning the sugar industry — a small activist group was able to present a formidable challenge to an entire industry.

Evaluation of the Relevance of a Web-Based "Ask an Expert" Feature: StratSoy and Soy and Human Health Queries

D.L. Wool, A.G. Kanfer, J. Michaels, S. Thompson, S.A. Morris, C.M. Hasler

Abstract

StratSoy, a state-of-the-art Web-based information system, has an "Ask an Expert" (AE) feature that allows Web site browsers to question experts in 13 areas including Soy and Human Health (SHH). The objectives of this research were to: a) assess the use of the SHH AE feature; b) examine respondent attitudes about soy-related topics to help guide development of a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section; and c) improve the information (continued)
If one compares the Florida sugar tax controversy to L. Grunig’s (1992) conclusions about activism, similarities also will become apparent. In this case, activism certainly did have a significant impact on the target organization. If nothing else, one should note that the sugar industry was forced to spend $24 million in the campaign. In addition, the sugar industry was portrayed to voters as irresponsible stewards of the environment.

This conflict between the sugar industry and SOE followed L. Grunig’s conclusion (1992) that disputes between activist groups and organizations tend to revolve around a singular issue. The battle between the sugar industry and SOE can be boiled down to whether or not the Florida sugar industry should be held responsible for pollution and if it should be subject to a tax embedded in the state’s constitution. This conflict also followed L. Grunig’s conclusion that activists and organizations use public relations practitioners to communicate with one another. There is little, if any, evidence that members of the two organizations tried to establish common ground and compromise. Instead, they relied on the products of public relations practitioners, such as press releases and television rebuttals.

The last of L. Grunig’s conclusions on activism that can be compared to this conflict is that all of J. Grunig’s (1989) models of communication were practiced by the sugar industry. The mailers and television spots can be considered little other than press agency. The press releases are examples of public information. The sugar industry relied heavily on public opinion polls, demonstrating two-way asymmetrical communication; the fact that the research was being used to manipulate the message to achieve desired goals keeps it from being two-way symmetrical. Perhaps the only example of two-way symmetrical public relations practiced by the sugar industry was sending employees into the communities to personally carry its message to the voters and to foster understanding between the industry and the people who would be making the decisions in the voting booths.

One major impact of this conflict is that agriculturists across the state of Florida have become aware of the reality of challenges from environmental activists. This realization has led to a spirit of cooperation among Florida agricultural communicators, because not all commodity groups have the same finan-
cial resources as the sugar industry. The Agriculture Institute of Florida, a group of professional agricultural communicators representing various aspects of Florida’s agricultural industry, meets frequently to share issues and strategies, such as responding collaboratively to activist groups.

The Florida sugar industry has already publicly acknowledged its commitment to support other segments of the agriculture industry if they are faced with similar challenges from activist groups. The sugar industry and, perhaps, the whole of Florida agriculture, were forced to view themselves through the public’s eyes. One U.S. Sugar Corporation representative said, “They almost got us. They’ll get citrus or tomatoes or some other commodity if we don’t stand together... If we don’t all stand up and come to whatever commodity is the next one to be singled out, we’re going to lose one sooner or later” (Gamer, 1997, p. 6).

Further research should be conducted to examine exactly what did and did not work, in terms of public relations and communications strategies, during the campaign. A content analysis of the television spots and mailers would be a good first step in determining exactly what was and was not effective. It also would be useful to know what impact the sugar tax controversy has had on Florida voters’ opinions of both agriculture and environmental activism.

**Keywords**

Environment, Public Relations, Crisis Communications, Activism

**References**


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