

Speaking to Customers: The Anthropology of Communications*

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1.0 Introduction

"But what are they doing with my money?"

This chapter, at its most specific, is about making sense of questions like this one, which was posed by an electric utility customer to fellow customers. More generally, it is about interpreting the meanings of what people ask or say in order to make relevant responses. Taken at face value, the question posed above is simply a query for information. Judged by the supporting chorus of 'yeahs' voiced by fellow customers when it was raised and the frequency with which the question is posed (by virtually any group of customers across the country), it is a question that is in sore need of an answer. Efforts by companies to respond by merely providing the apparently sought-for information often fail to silence the crowd -- The information is not believed, or not 'heard'. For example, when residential customers are shown direct mail pieces outlining company costs in the form of pie charts, graphs and the like, they respond with skepticism: How do we know these numbers are accurate? How can this [fuel, labor, operations, etc.] cost so much? Surrounded by customer voices such as these, I get the distinct impression that no matter how many times these customers are spoken to, their questions will keep coming. Lots of answers, no satisfaction.

The view taken here is that words speak of larger truths about the subject, whether the subject is a product, issue, service or company. These truths are culturally based beliefs constructed through daily experience, historical understanding, advertising or some other form of communication. In this case, beliefs about utility companies are implicit in the question: These companies are accountable to customers in ways other companies are not.

Customers' beliefs about utilities are framed by assumptions they make about big business, monopolies and the government (Denny and Russell, 1994) -- and more specifically, about how they think companies think about them. "But what are you doing with my money?" is a question not asked of the local supermarket, department store or car dealer. We do ask it of the government, in reference to our tax dollars, and of free market companies only if we are stockholders. The point is that the ways individuals choose to talk tells us something about the implicit relationships between speaker and subject, and these relationships need to be understood by corporations whenever the subject 'speaks' to customers -- in the form of services and products, advertising or policy development.

I use the recent concern about electromagnetic fields, or EMF, as a way to demonstrate the richness of speech and the benefits of analysis when designing communication strategies. Public concern about electromagnetic fields, or EMF, has risen dramatically in the last few years. Paul Brodeur made headlines with his book "Currents of Death" and made EMF a household term through subsequent articles and talk show appearances. Articles about EMF appeared in Family Circle ("Danger in the Schoolyard") and The New Yorker in the early 90s. The topic has been addressed by Ted Koppel on Nightline and Larry King on CNN. The concern is with the link between childhood leukemia and exposure to electromagnetic fields. While the scientific evidence isn't clear, some of the epidemiological data support the claim that exposure to EMF increases the probability of childhood leukemia.

Electric utilities have felt the impact of customer concern because "power lines" are often targeted as the source of EMF by media. As a consequence, the issue is a focus of communication for electric utilities. Impetus for resolving the issue has only grown as lawsuits are filed and receive attention (Richards, 1993). A suit against San Diego Gas &

Electric (Lane, 1993) for knowing that high voltage lines can cause cancer, heard in the spring of 1993, was lost by the plaintiffs. While other suits have met with similar results, the unspoken fear is that one day a suit will be won, leaving utilities extremely vulnerable. As task forces are convened within companies to grapple with the limits of their responsibility and the practical implications of policy decisions, consumer concern grows in fits and starts, locally and nationally. Customers' views of company actions and companies' views of customer needs often elicit looks of shocked surprise from company executives and customers, respectively. Resolving the discrepant perspectives is a necessary prerequisite for developing a successful EMF policy.

The data cited here were collected in 2 separate studies. In the first (from 1991), my client was a southern electric utility, concerned about potential fallout from customers in response to EMF publicity. At this point, there was no company policy directing communications about EMF, the history of nuclear plant communications disasters were still capable of making company executives squirm uncomfortably, and the company had plans to extend high voltage wires in urban and rural areas. Their goal was to gauge customer concerns about EMF and to construct a communications policy that directly responded to these concerns. In the second study (from 1993), my client was also an electric utility, this time in the northeastern U.S. Their EMF policy was quite developed, involving interfaces with state agencies, individualized response to customer queries, funding of EMF research, among other things. They were also facing an EMF-related lawsuit. The director of corporate communications, in this case, still felt that company communications were lacking. Something.

So in both cases, my role as a research supplier was to give these companies a way to think about their communications needs (in common parlance, a strategy): what were the problems, what were the constraints, what were the corporate options within these

constraints, (e.g., make EMF go away? make it manageable? make the utility a good guy? non-obstructive? customer partner?). As an anthropologist, my goal was to understand EMF in cultural context: native definitions and symbolic weight. From an analytic standpoint, I was interested in customers' definitions of EMF -- the meanings implicitly and explicitly attached to the term, the frames of reference invoked by customers to interpret information on EMF. The logic was that by understanding this cultural etymology, so to speak, we would have a better chance to respond to significant customer needs. As a linguistic sort of anthropologist, I looked to the ways customers spoke about the issue as the primary means for understanding its meaning.

2.0 Point of Departure

In focusing on how people use words to voice larger truths about themselves and others, this work is a practical application and contemporary illustration of ethnography of speaking, a movement that in the last 30 years has studied the ways in which speech is organized in social life. Often pushed forward by Hymes (1962, 1972), this coalition of linguists, sociologists and anthropologists argues against the notion of a linguistic system that is independent of the culture within which it lives or the social process within which it is cast about and towards which it contributes.

Much ethnography of speech has focused on documenting the scope and nature of linguistic regularities in social context. This might mean the differential distribution of sounds, e.g., use of post-vocalic |r| across social classes (Labov, 1966), speech styles (Joos, 1967; Hymes, 1977), terms of address, pronominal usage, e.g., use of formal and familiar |you| forms in Russian (Friedrich, 1966), or taking turns in conversation (Denny, 1985), or the performative social roles that speech enables (Bauman and Scherzer, 1977). The terms of address used, the form of pronoun chosen, or the way speaking turns are transacted say something about (or point to) the relationships among the speakers.

Qualities such as deference, solidarity or distance are communicated. What anchors this work is a premise about the way language works -- a dynamic system that reflects, perpetuates and creates social, not merely cognitive, action.

In a similar vein, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) focus on how a culture's metaphors structure experience. Metaphor is not simply a poetic, literary device (e.g., LOVE IS A ROSE). Rather, metaphors are chosen, displayed and negotiated in everyday speech. They show systematic and pervasive patterns that reflect a society's particular assumptions about the world we live in and the way it works -- its worldview and its ethos (Sherry, 1984). In the U.S., for example, TIME IS MONEY:

Corresponding to the fact that we act as if time is a valuable commodity. . . we conceive of time that way. Thus we understand and experience time as the kind of thing that can be spent, wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or poorly, saved or squandered (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:8).

Use of these (or related) analytic frames in consumer research are few and far between and when they are found, typically reference advertising texts (Mick, 1986; Sherry, 1987; Sherry and Camargo, 1987; Stern, 1988) or other forms of sales pitches (Sherry, 1988; Pinch and Clark, 1986). Somewhat ironic is that the methods applied to the analysis of advertising are typically not applied to everyday speech -- as though the former constitutes a performance and the latter does not.

If ethnography of speaking was identified as such in the last 30 years, the effort got a significant push from an earlier group of linguistic scholars, the Prague structuralists of the 1940s and 50s. This group includes Mukarovsky, Havranek, Trubetzkoy and, in this country, Jakobson. These scholars viewed language as having distinct functional styles that through careful observation of speakers could be identified and meaning derived. Styles are bound to contexts of occurrence -- what might be appropriate in one context

would not be for another. Contexts themselves are defined linguistically and, more applicable for our interests here, by individuals -- their social roles, their reason for speaking, and so on. These styles can be thought of as conventions -- culturally based ways for communicating

In anchoring their focus to context of use, these theorists articulated indexical properties of language, in contrast to symbolic. Following the distinction of Pierce, articulated at length by Silverstein (1976), indexical signs are those "where the occurrence of the sign vehicle token bears a connection of understood spatio-temporal contiguity to the occurrence of the entity signaled" (1976:27). Conversationally based indexicals include sound patterns ("wash" vs. "warsh", for example, points to region and social class), pronouns, terms of address, or use of silence. Consumer examples include red suspenders, popular necktie patterns or the white band of skin on a 'wedding finger'. In each case, significance stems from an original spatial and temporal relationship between object and context of its occurrence: The wearing of red suspenders and ties of certain patterns by Wall Street's power brokers in the 1980s or the state of being married. Indexicals are opposed to icons, which bear a physical relationship to the entity signaled (e.g., pictures), and to symbols which bear an arbitrary relationship (currency is a good example in the consumer world). By their use, social roles and relations may be reflected and perpetuated.

In the example used above ("but what are they doing with my money?") the nature of the question says something about the customer - utility relationship. It is clear from the question that the customer assumes that money paid to the company is still the customer's (indicated by use of "my") and that the company is accountable to customers for their spending decisions. Chrysler customers don't feel the company should consult them on capital investment decisions, yet utility customers are often angry that the company didn't

consult them before investing in nuclear plants (or other types of generating plants).

These assumptions point to a long-lasting, mutually dependent relationship rather than short-lived contractual arrangements characteristic of American purchasing in general.

Considered within the world of market research, I reference the Prague model in a few ways. First, I think of the relationship between consumer and producer as a dialogue, if not always a direct one. Producers 'speak' in the form of advertising, services or products. Consumers 'speak' in the form of protests, purchases or in the ways they talk about the producer/product. Clearly my notion of exchange is broadly construed and includes the social and symbolic dimensions, not merely the economic (Levy, 1978).

Second, by studying the speech conventions used by consumers, we can understand the subject (be it product, service, company or issue) better. Whether we analyze them or not, individuals draw on these conventions to express themselves. And these conventions are culturally based. They might be linguistic markers such as pronouns, but they might be in the form of metaphors, use of speech events like questions or the display of apparently contradictory opinions. Think of someone's talk as a poem rather than an immutable display of descriptive fact. The "poetic structure" provides a window for gleaning a richer understanding of what is being expressed by speakers. In our case, the interest is in the beliefs individuals have about utility companies, energy production or consumption, or environmental threats.

Finally, the Prague structuralists identified a mechanism for articulating the meaning of linguistic signs. Today we refer to markedness of a sign (speech or otherwise) but this characterization stems from Havranek's (1955) distinction between automatized or foregrounded uses of a particular convention within contexts of speech. Following Havranek (1955), when an occurrence of a sign (an indexical in Peircean terms) is an

expected or usual event it is automatized. Its use would function as a simple affirmation of shared knowledge. For example, the use of a term of address such as "Doctor" by a patient would be considered usual or expected and points to the authority and expertise accorded the physician's status. When appearing in an unexpected time or place, then the use is marked or foregrounded, e.g. the use of "Doctor" by a spouse, probably in a sarcastic tone. Drawing on its unmarked context for significance, a foregrounded use may be a comment on behavior (that the individual is acting like a physician and not a spouse), and perhaps a directive to the hearer to behave differently. Tannen (1993) in an article appearing in the New York Times Sunday magazine used markedness to talk about men and women's dress codes. Men, she argued, constitute the unmarked case (vis. women) -- their ubiquitous jacket and tie says 'male in the workplace.' Women's dress is marked -- *whatever* they choose to wear is saying something or, at least, will be interpreted as a comment by her on her role and attitude toward the workplace.

In the present case, the great significance of "what are they doing with my money?" is the fact that it is an unusual query with reference to American commerce (it is a marked or foregrounded use). And the interpreted meaning is located in its automatized or unmarked use -- when referencing government or, even more literally, when stated by stockholders. Marking has the effect of transferring indexical meanings to new referents, in this case, utility customers are referencing themselves, unconsciously but clearly I think, as shareholders.

Analytically, we observe conversations (audiotapes or transcripts) and ask the question: what must be true about the world for this utterance (or set of utterances) to make sense for speaker and fellow discussants? What is implicit in the speech about the subject at hand? What tones of voice are used? What metaphors surface? How are questions phrased? What descriptors are used by respondents? Importantly, where else have we

heard these ways of expression? Comparison allows us to discern some of the marked and unmarked uses of conventions. In all, analysis unearths some of the cultural baggage that, in this instance, infuses consumer understanding of a particular environmental threat.

To view a given speech event systematically, Jakobson's "Metalanguage as a linguistic problem" (1980) is helpful, as he lays out the various functions of language as they are brought to bear in communicating. For example, he discusses the emotive function which refers to the attitude of the speaker towards his subject, the conative function which refers to the orientation of speaker to hearer, and so on. Another, but more limiting, way of interpreting speech is by looking at the illocutionary force of utterances as described by Austin (1963). The approach at B/R/S reflects the interests and proclivities of its researchers. So we tend to focus on the questions people ask (what is assumed by the query vis the speaker's worldview and/or ethos?) or other formal (typically indexical) characteristics of the speech events. For example, in a recent study on Microsoft's brand image we noticed that the words typically used in describing the company were |-ing| words: leading, driving, exciting and so on. The particular theory and method is less important than applying one in the first place.

3.0 "Currents of Death": Talking about Electromagnetic Fields

3.1 The Data

The data consist of 10 group discussions, each group having 10 to 12 participants. Four of the groups took place in Louisiana (1991), the remainder in the northeast U.S. (1992-1993). In each case, the participants reflected a local demographic profile. In each group, half the respondents were male and half were female. They ranged in age from 25 to 60 and tended to have children at home. In the south, income ranged from \$20,000 to \$50,000 and education ranged from high school to college graduates. In the northeast,

household incomes were higher (\$30,000 - \$70,000) as was educational level (reflecting the client's sense of the key target audience for EMF communications). Participants were only recruited if they felt they were at least "somewhat familiar" with EMF. Concern with the issue varied from none at all to extreme. Each was audiotaped and the Louisiana groups were transcribed.

The most similar format to our approach to group discussions is the focus group. Like focus groups, our respondents are recruited by local market research facilities, screened for designated criteria, asked to participate and paid for their time (\$30 - \$45). Each discussion is about two hours long and each is audiotaped.

Unlike focus groups, these conversations are organized with a series of "tasks" that respondents complete as a group, with minimal intervention by us. These tasks are designed to get at potentially deep issues and allow respondents to use their own language to voice their opinions. For example, groups in the northeast were asked to "write" an editorial for the New York Times on EMF. Groups were asked to debate positions or outline magazine articles on new technology. Participants completed these tasks out loud through discussion that was managed more or (often) less by an appointed chair. The editorial, for example, would have a designated editor-in-chief who would direct the groups' discussion of what points to include in the editorial, the stand the group wanted to take and so on. While the scope of topics is determined by us in the "task" format, the ways in which opinions, concerns or 'facts' are articulated are relatively unconstrained. Finally, the goal is not the completion of each task, but the examination of the process by which respondents give voice to their thoughts. Our aim is to discern the meaning embedded in their talk -- in this case, about EMF and about electric utilities.

3.2 The Folk Definition of EMF: "Does EMF cause cancer?"

If a single sentence were to summarize customer concern about EMF emerging from our groups it would have to be "Does it cause cancer?" The question is a loaded one and attempts to answer it are all too often met with a disappointed (sometimes disgusted) shake of the consumer's head. In particular, the question is loaded with expectations of corporate response which, in turn, stem from particular beliefs about business and technology. These beliefs tend to frame customer interpretation of EMF information, reactions to EMF stories or opinions about the EMF issue.

American Industry

In absence of evidence to the contrary, customers generally assume that the utility industry will follow the historical precedent of industry in general, or at least their idea of industry and its history. So, for example, respondents believed their electric company might sacrifice safety for profit or withhold key information on EMF:

"They're avoiding prevention to save on costs."

"Hey, we'd save a lot of government money if we stopped doing this dance. . . and make them come clean. . . and say 'hey, we know you know' and 'you know we know you know'. . . and get on to the solutions and stop the dance."

"Are they sharing all that matters?"

These statements assume an adversarial relationship in which EMF is viewed as a consumer problem, not one shared by the company. Moreover, the industry most called upon by analogy is the tobacco industry: powerful, greedy and self-interested. The unusual relationship between company and customer (based on long-lasting interdependence) doesn't provide a counterpoint to the negative view of "industry" in general. Instead, it appears to compound it and catalyze greater emotional feeling behind

the question, "Does EMF cause cancer?" Resolution of the issue, or an adequate response, is all the more important because of the interdependence characteristic of the company-customer relationship.

Even without the imputation of malfeasance, our respondents tended to be blind toward company actions:

"I haven't heard them address the problem"

"We're not condemning the fact that [the company is] standing still but. . ."

And, taken to an extreme, consumers' lack of knowledge itself is seen as an intentional act by the company:

"Why *weren't* we told?"

"Why are most people ignorant about EMF? Is it a cover-up?"

Taken together, these statements imply that the company ought to be doing something. Indeed the lack of visible action spurs ever greater skepticism about motives.

Electric Technology

Customers exhibit a lack of surprise when faced with EMF headlines. Nods and an air of resignation are more typical responses. This reaction stems in part from ambivalent feelings about technology in general. While technology can represent excitement, innovation and power over surroundings, it is also thought to threaten social relations and be harmful through unintended effects. Technology is definitely a mixed blessing (Sherry, 1984).

At its most positive, technology confers power and excitement. Examples cited by respondents such as microwaves or cellular phones allow individuals greater control over time; computer networks easily override traditional limits of geography; and medical applications have extended or improved quality of life. Consumers expect technology to

be a source for future stimulation and fun, "the best is yet to come" attitude. But with the positive is an expected downside. Technology carries an implication of social harm ("We let technology control us"): "Too much" TV, computer games, and so on, are thought to affect the quality of social relationships. Technology can be harnessed for destruction, e.g., smart missiles. Breakthroughs at one time yield disaster at a later time. The initial headlines about EMF are understood within this frame-- another technological feat gone awry.

However, electric companies in particular are singled out by customers. High voltage wires offer a powerful construct of danger for customers, offering them a means for visualizing EMF, or making it concrete. Customers further elaborate through their own experience with electricity:

"It's like static electricity when you walk across the carpet"

"You can feel your hair stand up near an electric pole"

"It's what happens when you put a fluorescent bulb in a microwave or near a power line and it lights up"

"Hear 'em singing"

The new information for customers is that proximity, not just touch, is enough to be dangerous.

Some of our respondents also assumed that EMF is a by-product of electricity. As such, it is an avoidable phenomenon:

"Residual electricity"

"It's too much current on the line" or "Overload"

"Why does it have to be leaking out?"

Underlying these beliefs are metaphors of both quantity and containment. More is worse/less is okay ("What is the level that can be tolerated?"), and solutions are technical ones that have to do with containment ("shielding", "wrapping" or for some, "burying").

A key aspect of technology, then, is control: the ability to manage it. Otherwise, chaos threatens. EMF becomes an example of 'unmanaged' technology, raising the question: why wasn't it managed better? And how can it best be managed now? As the company is culturally implicated, if you will, in the EMF issue, it is looked upon to respond to these implicit questions.

3.3 Implications for Communications

Beliefs about American industry and electric technology together with the customer - company relationship put electric companies in a paradoxical space. Customers will continue to ask their local company, "Does EMF cause cancer?" and not hear, accept or otherwise favorably respond to the company's answer.

In my experience, electric utilities have tended to respond by taking the question "Does EMF cause cancer?" at face value. They adhere to the myth of objectivism (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) in their belief that the world is composed of objects whose properties are independent of the individuals who experience them, that we can make statements of unequivocal truth or falsity about this world, that words have fixed meanings and individuals just need to be skilled enough to use words precisely and appropriately (1980: 187). Implicit in this view is that linguistic expressions are objects and communication is likened to a conduit metaphor (fixed message from sender to receiver). If only customers, employees, communicators and so on were more competent in using words

appropriately! (This view surfaces in a variety of corporate contexts when designers, marketers, CEOs or whomever disparage customers for just not getting it or believe their communication problems would be solved if customers were just educated on the topic). Utility companies may or may not make scientific reports available to customers, but in any case they summarize such studies by stating that "research is inconclusive", that "more studies are being done" and the company is making every effort by "continuing to fund research." And yet the answers seem, at best, unsatisfying and, at worst, intentional obfuscation.

Company attempts to explain or define EMF can also have the same effect. Diagrams sometimes look as though they're cut from engineering books and language can unwittingly play on the concerns customers have without addressing them. For example, EMF is described as "an invisible force" that "surrounds" any flow of current in which "the magnitude of the force" depends on current and proximity to the source. And this is education? From a customer's standpoint this sounds like radiation. Common measures of EMF (in milligauss) around the home are sometimes given, yet customers have no way to evaluate the significance of these numbers. Indeed, the company may say there *is* no way to evaluate significance.

"Does EMF cause cancer?" The question presupposes an expertise on the company's part. In asking it of the company, customers are granting the company authority on the subject in some way. Given the belief customers have about technology (namely that it has unintended consequences), the content of the question might be rephrased as "what are the unintended side effects of electricity production?" or "what's the downside?" Implied also in the question, I believe, are the other questions deriving from the technology mindset: "Why do we have this problem?" and "What are you doing about it?" Beliefs about the way big business functions and the unusual nature of the company

- customer relationship are additional factors through which corporate responses are filtered and interpreted by customers. There are a number of implications:

- Silence can be damning. Apparent silence, in the face of public concern, takes on a specter of active avoidance. Further, the burden appears to be on the utility to grab the attention of its customers. It isn't enough to be able to point to communications efforts; the company must be able to point to efforts that succeeded. This is done most convincingly if customers feel they themselves have been reached. Acting out of the ordinary, as an indication that EMF is not 'business as usual', would have this effect. Candor about the way customers view the company's actions around environmental threats would be a first step. Resonating with customers' ideas indicates the company has spent time trying to understand them. (Picture an ostrich on a full page in the Wall Street Journal with a headline something like "This is us when it comes to EMF" followed with an explanation of why the metaphor would no longer be appropriate. Guaranteed to be seen by customers, but oh so unlikely to get past company legal departments.)
- If central to the (perceived) problem, companies should be central to the solution. This means demonstrating leadership and leveraging their expertise. "Funding research" or responding to customer questions, two frequent corporate responses, lack a proactive stance that typifies leadership. Instead, inertia is signaled, so the clout that customers associate with big business is not being used to customer advantage. Thus a neutral or "supporting" position is interpreted as an act of noncompliance.
- The utility is, at best, an active guide of consumer understanding. Data dumps of 'the facts' to customers won't help mediate the perceived opposition of company and

customer ("they're passing the buck"). Facts about the issue are important to give, but so is a way to interpret the facts. Customers have to come to their own conclusions, the company cannot do this for them, e.g., in the form of "we don't have a problem." But it is critical that the company provide a means for allowing customers to think through the issue; if they don't, another frame of reference will be invoked, one less complimentary of the corporate position.

4.0 Conclusions

The need to understand company - customer relationships is particularly acute when the marketplace is changing, bringing corporate entities into focus when they might otherwise be invisible. And change is here today. New technology is catalyzing a repositioning of communications and entertainment companies. Deregulation and environmental threats are making gas and electric utilities more conscious of themselves and their image. The mainstreaming of environmental concern places chemical companies and the issue of federal regulations in consumer focus. Rapid technological advances keep the computer industry in a state of flux. Globalization raises the question of whether to leverage the corporate brand as a means for introducing particular products.

In all these cases, the role of the corporate brand is at issue (in marketing terms, its equity). Following Blackston (1992), I'll differentiate a brand's fundamental equities deriving from its products, pricing and so on, from its "added value" equities. In the terms of this chapter, a brand's added value equity is the cultural baggage that hangs onto the brand -- the set of assumptions consumers will make about the company's products or services before they even experience them. In times of change, companies may well rely on these meanings when they 'speak' to customers via advertising, new policies or products. Equally likely, they will be hampered by these meanings. In leveraging the corporate brand, the logic behind communications runs something like, "If they know us

and like (or trust) us, they'll choose (support, believe) us." Yet knowing what is meant by liking or trust depends on understanding the sources of distrust and being able to mediate them effectively.

I've argued here that literal expressions of like/dislike cannot be taken at face value, that understanding rests on interpreting the ways opinions or statements are made.

Communication is not a closed system. It is not an objective enterprise between sender and receiver. It's messy. It's variable. Most importantly, it's interactional. It's also systematic. Ethnographers of speech recognize this and use speech as a means for understanding broader social codes and the dynamics of change and meaning (re)formation. I apply these principles to corporate and consumer environments, working with marketers, communications executives, advertising research directors and so on, to understand a customer point of view. What I do, of course, is help them understand their own point of view and, through the process, (re)solve specific communications problems: developing an EMF policy, repositioning the Jeep brand, figuring out a worldwide creative strategy for Microsoft.

A critical piece of any communications strategy is defining a realistic goal. In the EMF case, persuading customers that EMF is not a problem is unrealistic (and absolutely a waste of time). Persuading customers that EMF is not a utility's problem is similarly unrealistic. Nor should the strategy attempt to make consumers into engineers.

Resorting to the "education" of consumers as the means for implementing change in all likelihood won't work. One isn't so much imparting knowledge as arguing for a particular experiential world view and, moreover, arguing its superiority. It might be more useful to construct the goal in terms of a desired (and achievable) company-customer relationship -- allies, perhaps, in determining the nature of this particular risk.

Given the starting point is an adversarial we-they relationship, the strategy has to outline a progression of steps, not least of which is being heard in the first place.

I have used electric utilities to illustrate the need of ethnographic readings of speech because they make a lot of mistakes and they are errors that stem from mis-readings of customer talk. But U.S. utility executives are not alone, their actions are simply more visible (by dint of culture). Consumer expectations of corporate identity and behavior and the beliefs spurring them will of course vary, depending on native views of industry distinctions -- Merrill Lynch vs. Commonwealth Edison vs. Chrysler -- and on change over time -- IBM in 1980 vs. IBM in 1990. Defining the constraints against which any communication strategy must work is necessary if it is to be successful, or heard as intended. IBM, for example, faces a radically different world in 1994. Hardware is increasingly a commodity, competitors are outstripping its market share and its ability to define technological change. Like an electric utility, IBM cannot change who it is overnight. As utilities cannot be understood easily by consumers as "free market" companies, IBM cannot be Microsoft. Yet change it must. How ads (corporate or product) speak to customers will be based on past "conversations" and our ability to interpret their import. Understanding talk -- theirs and ours -- is key.

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