

Enhancing Motivation, Ability, and Opportunity to Process Public Relations Messages

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on the motivation, ability, and opportunity (M-A-O) model in the consumer psychology literature, this article suggests that *motivation*, *ability*, and *opportunity* provide theoretically rich frameworks to address strategies for effective communication with publics in general and inactive publics in particular. Examples of specific techniques frequently used in the construction of public relations messages are related to each of these three concepts. Implications for public relations practice and research are discussed.

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Creating effective messages to reach strategically important audiences is a critical function in public relations. Elsewhere, I have addressed the importance of inactive publics in public relations and suggested a typology in which organizations might find themselves dealing with four principal types of publics: active, aroused, aware, and inactive. Depending on the circumstances, and considering the different levels of knowledge and involvement that these publics exhibit, organizations might need to respond differently to publics in each category.¹

For example, in dealing with active publics, that is, groups with high in-

volvement in and knowledge about a topic, it is rarely difficult to locate a group or capture its attention. Instead, the challenge for communicators is to find a common ground for understanding when viewpoints and goals differ sharply. By contrast, organizations face a quite different set of challenges when dealing with inactive publics, that is, groups with low levels of involvement in or knowledge about a topic of interest to the organization. Members of inactive publics tend to ignore messages not perceived as relevant to them. The problem is further compounded by the clutter of messages and the competition for attention in today's world.

In general, public relations theorists have failed to address strategies for communicating with inactive publics. In large measure, such concerns are summarily dismissed as mere persuasion attempts. This is ironic inasmuch as many public relations efforts are directed to inactive (vs. active) publics. Grunig and Hunt, for example, suggested that as much as one third of the population might be described as latent or inactive on any particular topic. Wilcox, Ault, and Agee similarly observed that most campaigns are designed to reach passive audiences.²

This inattention to the question is readily evident when examining the public relations literature. With the exception of limited-purpose situational theory, the public relations literature contains no systematic model that addresses how to segment publics or how different patterns of information processing by publics might impact message strategy. At best, introductory public relations texts provide generalized reviews of communication theory. Meanwhile, writing textbooks offer few insights to beginning writers about how to write effectively for different publics. Only the public relations methods texts by Hunt and Grunig and by Thompson addressed situational theory directly, although Wilcox and Nolte drew on Grunig to suggest that alternative strategies should be pursued when communicating with active versus passive audiences.³ Newsom and Carrell noted that the stronger a public's identity with an organization, the stronger will be its reaction to what the organizations says and does. But the authors do not elaborate on the implications for message strategy.⁴ Tucker, Derelian, and Rouner outlined a generalized "behavioral framework" that begins by focusing on audience needs, concerns, and interests, but does not differentiate between passive and active publics.⁵

Inactive publics, which can also be described as those groups that are *least attentive* to an organization's public relations messages, are important for a variety of practical and theoretical reasons. One reason is size. Efforts to reach these kinds of publics represent the most costly and intensive part of many contemporary public relations programs. Inactive publics are also the segments that many clients *want* to reach because these groups represent large numbers of potential purchasers, investors, workers, donors, or voters.

From a theoretical perspective, inactive publics are the groups from which aroused, aware, and active publics spring. Grunig and Repper suggested issues managers should be especially concerned with inactive audiences if the intent is to contain issues.⁶ In their model of the role of the public opinion formation process, Van Leuven and Slater argued that voters are *inactive publics* who become pivotal

as political issues become fully developed and enter the attitude crystallization and public action stages.⁷

Inactive publics are also interesting theoretically because they are the foundation upon which virtually all influence theories are based. Hierarchy of effects models suggest that the processes of selling a product, diffusing an innovation, and changing attitudes begin with first creating awareness and interest among otherwise disinterested audiences. Similarly, creating awareness is a prerequisite for enhancing the availability of information in memory, for agenda setting, for interpersonal influence, for advocacy, and for effecting change in health behaviors.⁸

THE M-A-O MODEL

Absent its own theoretical framework, public relations must look outside the field for a cogent and parsimonious framework in which to think about the creation of effective communications to publics who are inactive or inattentive. For many people in the field, *persuasion* falls short of being any kind of coherent theory. Furthermore, persuasion is an anathema to public relations theorists because of its connotations of manipulation and coercion. Alternatively, it is useful to consider the problem from an audience-centered perspective that focuses on how people process information.

During the past 15 years, social psychologists and consumer researchers have devoted considerable attention to identifying factors that impact message elaboration and message-evoked thinking. Out of this research agenda has emerged a consensus that three broad factors moderate or serve as *antecedents* to information processing by individuals: *motivation, ability, and opportunity* (M-A-O).⁹

This M-A-O model is predicated on findings that suggest people engage in progressive levels of processing, ranging from superficial to deep processing.¹⁰ Greenwald and Leavitt outlined four such levels of processing: preattention, focal attention, comprehension, and elaboration. The final step, elaboration, occurs when individuals restate messages and summarize their reactions to them.¹¹ These cognitive responses then serve as the basis for the information people store in memory.¹² Elaboration *likelihood*, thus, represents the probability that the highest-order form of information processing is achieved. Within an advertising context, MacInnis and Jaworski offered a similar six-stage model that begins with the analysis of message features, followed by categorization of the message and topic, meaning analysis, integration with personal experience, mental rehearsal (including role-taking and vicarious trial), and mental construction of product attributes and benefits, that is, elaboration.¹³

The conceptual origin of emphasizing motivation, ability, and opportunity can be traced to the development of dual processing models in the social psychology literature. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the lesser-known Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) both posit that topic-relevant involvement can play a pivotal role in the *strategies* people use to process information. Given adequate ability, highly motivated individuals process information effortfully

(ELM) or systematically (HSM), whereas individuals with low motivation rely on cognitive shortcuts referred to as peripheral cues (ELM) or heuristics (HSM). Both models posit that behavior can be influenced by using either approach. However, central route (ELM) or systematic (HSM) processing is more enduring than persuasion that relies on peripheral route (ELM) or heuristic (HSM) processing.¹⁴

The M-A-O model suggests communicators have two key challenges when constructing effective messages. The first is to *match* message content to an audience's level of processing. Petty and Cacioppo suggested that when consumers are unlikely to process information, it is important to sprinkle messages with affect-laden executional cues that will attract audiences and cause them to like a message. However, once individuals engage in deep processing, message affect is not as important as the strength or quality of arguments. The second role of message cues is to *encourage* deeper message processing, that is, to move individuals along the continuum of depth processing toward elaboration. MacInnis, Moorman, and Jaworski suggested in-depth processing is desirable for two reasons: first, attention is likely to be modest as a result of clutter and distractions in the typical public communication setting. Second, enhancing levels of processing evokes more enduring memory and attitude change.¹⁵

Deep processing often accompanies communication exchanges in which the parties are fully engaged, such as dialogue, negotiation, or bargaining. However, inactive publics, because of their low knowledge about and low involvement in a topic, are unlikely to engage in any more than superficial processing. Their processing of messages is likely to be limited to feature analysis, categorization, and elementary meaning analysis. Thus it becomes imperative to counter such processing inertia by enhancing the motivation, ability, and opportunities for publics to process public relations messages.

Components of the Model

Motivation

Motivation, the first antecedent in the model, refers to heightening arousal so that inactive audiences are ready, willing, interested, or desire to process a message. Functionally, heightened motivation represents a predisposition or preparedness to allocate precious cognitive resources to processing information. Motivation, represented in topic involvement, moderates the linkage between exposure, cognitive processing, and attitude formation. Individuals with low motivation pose particular challenges in terms of gaining attention without the inclusion of other compensating cues in the message.

Ability

Ability, the second antecedent, refers to the need to maximize an individual's skills or proficiencies in interpreting a message. Ability is a distinct concept from motivation. High-ability individuals are proficient at message processing because they

are experts, that is, they are knowledgeable about a topic. In general, high ability or knowledgeable individuals can process information more efficiently and schematically than can novices, that is, low-ability individuals. Members of inactive publics, who possess relatively lower levels of topic knowledge, are at a disadvantage compared to active or aware publics because members of inactive publics can access less extant knowledge available in memory about a topic or organization. Moreover, they are less likely to be able to access that information easily because they have not used it frequently. Tversky and Kahneman suggested that ready availability of and easy accessibility to information stored in memory operate heuristically to bias recall and related thought processes.¹⁶ The challenge for the communicator thus is to overcome this disadvantage and to assure that whatever knowledge a low-ability individual possesses can be effectively retrieved by the audience. The communicator thus must relate new information to other experiences that might be relevant to an individual.

Opportunity

Opportunity relates to the characteristics of the message that favor information processing. Whereas ability relates to information processing operations within the individual, opportunity focuses on attentional and capacity issues created by a communicator. In their original conceptualization of ability, Petty and Cacioppo combined elements of ability and opportunity. However, other researchers distinguish between the two. Batra and Ray limited ability to response-enabling variables *within the respondent's control*, for example, product knowledge, expertise, and self-schema. According to these researchers, opportunity refers to executional factors of a message that are *beyond the control of the individual*, such as exposure time, message length, the number of arguments, and the absence of distractions that detract from message processing.¹⁷

Implications of the Model

As a prerequisite for communicating with any public, public relations practitioners must be concerned with assuring that audiences possess sufficient motivation, ability, and opportunity to engage in the communication process. This is generally not a problem in the case of active publics, which are comparatively high in both knowledge and involvement and who create their own opportunities to communicate. For aroused publics, the challenge might be ability-based, that is, a lack of knowledge might make it difficult to communicate effectively even though these groups might be highly motivated or involved in an issue. For aware publics, the challenge might involve getting audiences to pay attention, even though members of aware publics might be perfectly competent to process communications once they do so. In all three cases, the creation of appropriate opportunities to communicate is a necessary condition for any form of advocacy or accommodation in public relations.

The need to focus on all three of these concepts converges with inactive

publics, who come into an organizational relationship with low involvement (motivation) and low topic knowledge (ability). This problem is made particularly acute because most communications with inactive publics, because of time and cost constraints, are conducted through mediated communications. Compared with person-to-person interaction, or even interactive information seeking by using a communications tool such as the Internet, media use is a comparatively routine, low-involvement experience based on incidental exposure. Uses and gratifications research suggests that people use mass media to fulfill a wide variety of needs and obtain gratifications quite separate from *utilitarian topic-related information seeking*. For example, media offer entertainment or diversion from the doldrums of everyday life and facilitate socially expressive needs. Thus, unlike the communication patterns found in situations such as collaboration, conflict resolution, or negotiation, audiences are unfocused and might have no specific communication or organization-related goals when they encounter public relations-generated mediated communications.

In addressing communications to inactive publics, public relations communications strategists must be keenly aware of the special problems of enhancing motivation, ability, and opportunity. The M-A-O model is useful because it provides a theoretical umbrella for integrating a variety of otherwise disjointed communications tactics.

The remainder of this article illustrates how the M-A-O model might be applied to develop a more systematic and theoretically rich understanding of public relations communications, particularly with inactive audiences, and outlines examples of specific techniques of message construction that fall within each category. Figure 1 also suggests that many “tricks of the trade” found in public relations practice today are actually well grounded theoretically. The discussion is not intended to be a comprehensive catalogue of all executional cues that are important to include in public relations messages. Instead, its purpose is to suggest the potential importance of motivation, ability, and opportunity as organizing principles for constructing effective messages.

ENHANCING MOTIVATION

Consumer research suggests that a variety of techniques can be used to enhance motivation. One of the most important involves the creation of an *attractive* and *interesting* message that will create positive affect. Consumer research has shown that attitudes toward communications messages (most commonly referred to as *attitude toward the ad*, or A_{ad}) moderate attitudes about the products, services, candidates, or causes featured in promotional messages. The extensive A_{ad} literature suggests that messages that strike affective responses generate more attention, greater interest, more cognitive responses, higher message recognition, and greater topic recall.¹⁸

Among the techniques that have been proven to stimulate greater message affect are appeals to *hedonistic needs*, such as sex and appetite,¹⁹ and the use of

Enhance Motivation	Enhance Ability	Enhance Opportunity
<i>Attract and encourage audiences to commence, continue processing</i>	<i>Make it easier to process the message by tapping cognitive resources</i>	<i>Structure messages to optimize processing</i>
<p>Create attractive, likable messages (create affect) Appeal to hedonistic needs (sex, appetite, safety) Use novel stimuli</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Photos <input type="checkbox"/> Typography <input type="checkbox"/> Oversized formats <input type="checkbox"/> Large number of scenes, elements <input type="checkbox"/> Changes in voice, silence, movement <p>Make the most of formal features</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Format size <input type="checkbox"/> Music <input type="checkbox"/> Color <input type="checkbox"/> Include key points in headlines <p>Use moderately complex messages</p> <p>Use sources who are credible, attractive or similar to audience</p> <p>Involve celebrities</p> <p>Enhance relevance to audience--Ask them to think about a question</p> <p>Use stories, anecdotes or drama to draw into action</p> <p>Stimulate curiosity: use humor, metaphors, questions</p> <p>Vary language, format, source</p> <p>Use multiple, ostensibly independent sources</p>	<p>Include background, definitions, explanations</p> <p>Be simple, clear</p> <p>Use advance organizers, e.g. headlines</p> <p>Include synopses</p> <p>Combine graphics, text <i>and</i> narration (dual coding of memory traces)</p> <p>Use congruent memory cues (same format as original)</p> <p>Label graphics (helps identify which attributes to focus on)</p> <p>Use specific, concrete (versus abstract) words and images</p> <p>Include exemplars, models</p> <p>Make comparison with analogies</p> <p>Show actions, train audience skills through demonstrations</p> <p>Include marks (logos, logotypes, trade marks), slogans and symbols as continuity devices</p> <p>Appeal to self-schemas (roles, what's important to audience's identity)</p> <p>Enhance perceptions of self-efficacy to perform tasks</p> <p>Place messages in conducive environment (priming effects)</p> <p>Frame stories using culturally resonating themes, catchphrases</p>	<p>Expend sufficient effort to provide information</p> <p>Repeat messages frequently</p> <p>Repeat key points within text--in headlines, text, captions, illustrations, etc.</p> <p>Use longer messages</p> <p>Include multiple arguments</p> <p>Feature "interactive" illustrations, photos</p> <p>Avoid distractions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Annoying music <input type="checkbox"/> Excessively attractive spokespersons <input type="checkbox"/> Complex arguments <input type="checkbox"/> Disorganized layouts <p>Allow audiences to control pace of processing</p> <p>Provide sufficient time</p> <p>Keep pace lively and avoid audience boredom</p>

See Deborah J. MacInnis, Christine Moorman, and Bernard J. Jaworski, "Enhancing and Measuring Consumers' Motivation, Opportunity and Ability to Process Brand Information from Ads," *Journal of Marketing*, 55 (October 1991), 23-53.

Figure 1. Motivation-Ability-Opportunity Model for enhancing message processing.

visuals.²⁰ Greater message affect also is created by use of *novel stimuli*: unusual photography, typography and layouts, oversized and unusual formats, sound effects, movement and changes of scenes in films, and sudden changes in voice and sound levels.²¹ Prominent use of a message's *figural* or *formal features* also has been shown to be effective. Examples include large pictures, large formats, loud volume and music, color (vs. black-and-white), and placement of attribute information in headlines (vs. body copy alone).²²

Message source is one of the most important factors that motivate processing. Sources perceived as attractive, trustworthy, expert, dynamic, and powerful are more engaging and effective than those that do not feature these characteristics. As conceptualized by dual processing researchers, source credibility operates as a peripheral cue or heuristic when individuals are unmotivated to process message arguments effortfully or systematically. Other research suggests source effects actually can serve as arguments when an individual considers a proposition or can heighten levels of affect that predispose audiences to respond favorably. Likewise, using spokespersons with characteristics similar to members of a target public can be effective because audiences identify a *goal congruity* between themselves and the source. Celebrity endorsers help inactive publics make vital linkages between topics already of interest to them and topics that might be of interest to an organization that employs a particular celebrity. The attention-getting power of celebrities has been recognized for a long time. Indeed, journalists cite prominence, that is, participation in news events by prominent people, as a basic news value that attracts audiences.²³

Other techniques to increase motivation evolve around enhancing the *relevance* of the message to individuals, a technique that has been shown to increase attention and message elaboration. Examples include appeals to fear and guilt, to self-interest, and to socially important interests²⁴ and the use of value-expressive appeals (vs. utilitarian appeals).²⁵

Beyond motivating individuals to attend to messages, researchers have suggested message creators can motivate processing other ways. The inclusion of familiar and easily processed *figures of speech* can make copy more accessible and inviting. Simply asking people to "Think for a moment. . ." about a particular question can serve as a *rhetorical device* to prompt processing. Using *stories* and *anecdotes* can also increase motivation to process by humanizing the topic and luring viewers into the action. Finally, *drama* has been demonstrated to evoke empathetic identification and to prompt people to draw their own conclusions as outside observers of the action (instead of being lectured to).²⁶

Message creators can increase *curiosity* about a topic by presenting information in ways that are slightly incongruent with expectations and thus encourage audiences to reconcile differences between the messages and their expectations. Examples include *humor* and *metaphors* that promote thinking. Still another potential motivation is to increase the amount of information to a moderate level.²⁷ Moderate complexity, that is, making a message not too simple but not too burdensome to process, stimulates attention to a message.²⁸ Similarly, correspondence theory suggests the value of including both positive and negative informa-

tion about an organization or its products or services in certain messages because the discrepancies encourage greater message evaluation.²⁹

Varying the way that information is presented also can help motivation. Mere repetition, generally considered an opportunity factor (see below), can facilitate learning and can contribute to liking a message. This phenomenon is known as the *mere exposure* effect.³⁰ However, presenting information in slightly *varied language and formats* or from different or *varied sources* stimulates thinking as people attempt to reconcile differences.³¹ Simply hearing about a subject from two or more independent sources, or hearing slightly inconsistent messages (such as different executions of the same message with the same theme or story line) can result in greater cognitive effort, more elaboration, and learning.³²

ENHANCING ABILITY

Closely aligned to the stimulation of thinking is the incorporation of executional cues that make it *easier* for inactive publics to access available knowledge and experience stored in memory. Such cues can be relevant to the topic of the message or more generally to the culture shared by the target public. Cultural cues are particularly important when communicating to subgroups (such as ethnic minorities) or to populations across cultural or national boundaries.

Executional cues facilitate retrieval of extant knowledge so information can be understandable and relevant and can be placed in context. The low expertise commonly found among inactive publics underscores the value of including an array of cues that will facilitate processing, such as background information, definitions, and explanations. Message simplicity and clarity enhance ability by helping audiences quickly and efficiently identify what a communication is about, and which memory traces should be accessed. The results are to minimize confusion or ambiguity and to enhance confidence in decision making.

When presenting new ideas or new information communicators must provide executional cues that allow people to tap their memory and locate relevant information and then to process new information correctly. Research suggests that memory is organized categorically in cognitive structures known as schemas. In describing products, services, candidates, or causes, it is valuable to classify them as being of a particular type or category, while still positioning them as being distinctive from others in the same category.³³

Various techniques of *message construction* enhance ability as well. For example, headlines can operate as *advanced organizers* to tell what a message is about, whereas *synopses* can provide summaries that reassure audiences about their ability to process a more complex message. Using multiple modalities (for example, narration, graphics, and text in combination) allows the use of multiple cognitive resources. The resulting *dual-coding* of information allows people to tap different sorts of memory traces (e.g., sight vs. sound) that might be stored or associated with a particular modal form. Research suggests that the *congruity*

between the form and context of information at the time that it is encoded and the form and context of information at the time it is retrieved will enhance recall. In the same way, congruity in the *mood* of the individual at the time of information encoding and retrieval from memory also can have a facilitating effect.³⁴ Finally, *simple labeling* of graphical elements (photos, illustrations, charts and graphs, etc.) enhances ability by drawing attention to the particular attributes depicted. Labels result in greater recognition, less response time, more consistent attitudes, and higher behavioral intent because of the presence of the cue.³⁵

Using specific words and images also influences ability. A sizable literature suggests the use of concrete (vs. abstract) words greatly improves understanding, that is, the ability to identify familiar topics, analyze their meaning, and integrate them with extant knowledge. Concrete word choice has been demonstrated to lead to higher recognition and recall, as well as attention to particular attributes—although some researchers question the value of vividness.³⁶ Other research has suggested that ability can be enhanced through the use of *exemplars* to typify an idea; *demonstrations* to illustrate how things work; and *analogies* to link new ideas with older, familiar concepts. Finally, the use of *symbols*, *slogans*, and *marks* (logos, logotypes, service marks, and trademarks) provide valuable markers or continuity devices that can help access extant memory structures. Such memory retrieval cues are the foundation for branding and for integrated marketing campaigns.³⁷

Another way communicators can enhance audience ability is to tap into individuals' *self-schemas*, that is, their self-perceptions about their identities—who they are, what they aspire to be, and roles that are appropriate or important for them. Self-perceptions about one's identity or *defining traits* (vs. all self-related knowledge) are thought to be organized schematically in memory and are chronically accessible, and readily activated. Examples include self-perceptions related to one's gender, family role, or occupation. Other examples include personal characteristics considered to be important, such as self-sufficiency or independence. People are able to make self-referent judgments rapidly and accurately, to remember information related to their perceptions of themselves, and to make trait-consistent inferences and judgments quite easily. Information congruent with one's self-concept is processed more easily and confidently than is incongruent or irrelevant information.³⁸ Advertising copywriters have understood this principle for years, focusing on the *benefits* (vs. mere features) of products and linking benefits to personal characteristics that individuals consider important. Similarly, information campaigns have emphasized the importance of enhancing perceptions of one's *self-efficacy*, that is, a person's self-perception that he or she can achieve a desired outcome, and the importance of enabling people to *mentally rehearse* the performance of desired actions.³⁹

The information environment in which communication occurs similarly impacts the ability to process information. *Contextual effects* can operate through a process of *priming* wherein the information environment surrounding a message provides cues for its interpretation. Priming is particularly important when the meaning of information is ambiguous. In the mass media, for example, adjacent editorial or advertising content can provide cues that suggest audiences examine

messages in particular ways.⁴⁰ Recent research also suggests that individuals might process information differentially, based on the *content class* of the message, that is, whether it appears as news, advertising, or entertainment. News might provide certain advantages over advertising because news provides different cues about the intent of a message (to *tell*, not *sell*) and thus invokes different schema-based rules for processing. Moreover, evidence suggests that people might be less favorably predisposed to process advertising versus news.⁴¹

Another technique that enhances ability involves *framing*. Framing devices are executional cues that focus attention on particular attributes of a topic while excluding others, in much the same way a frame provides focus for a picture. At least seven forms of framing relevant to public relations can be identified. These include the framing of situations, attributes, risky choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. The effect of framing is to shape the meaning that might be derived from any particular message. In the case of news stories, executional cues take the form of culturally resonating symbols presented in the form of depictive terms, catch phrases, metaphors, exemplars, and reinforcing visual images.⁴² To the extent that a message focuses attention and strikes a responsive chord within the individual, framing enhances ability by tapping culturally ingrained knowledge and can be especially effective in conditions of low motivation.

ENHANCING OPPORTUNITY

In addition to motivating and enabling less attentive publics, public relations communicators must create sufficient opportunity for audiences to process messages. In large measure, this can be achieved only if *sufficient effort* is exerted to reach audiences. A public relations program or campaign must have sufficient programmatic *power* to gain exposure and to capture the attention of target publics. An effective program cannot be a casual, haphazard undertaking. Opportunity in public relations is created through concerted and coordinated efforts that involve creating multiple message exposures and structuring messages so people can process them easily.

Repetition is a classic opportunity enhancement strategy used by advertisers. Audiences with low interest in a product are exposed to messages an optimal number of times to assure they process the message. Krugman contended that at least three exposures are required (but also might be sufficient to attain optimal effects).⁴³ In advertising, the creation of repetition is comparatively straightforward and involves purchasing blocks of time or space within media to which audiences are likely to be exposed. In publicity, a mainstay of many public relations programs, repetition is more difficult to achieve because reputable news organizations will run a story only once—while it is news. Repetitive exposure requires obtaining coverage in multiple news outlets, creating still other “news angles” that will garner additional coverage, or combining publicity with other forms of media (public media, interactive media, controlled media, events, and one-on-one communications) to reinforce key messages as part of an integrated campaign.⁴⁴

Message characteristics that can enhance message opportunity include the use of *longer messages* (e.g., longer articles, 60-s vs. 30-s public service announcements, etc.). Thus more time is created for audiences to be exposed to or to attend to the message. Opportunities to process also can be enhanced by stating key themes in multiple ways, such as repetition of key copy points in headlines, summaries, text, captions, illustrations, and so forth. Inclusion of one over-all theme or proposition, accompanied by *multiple supporting arguments*, also provides more opportunity for communicating an organization's story. Evidence suggests that the mere number of arguments can operate as an impressive and persuasive heuristic in persuasion, whereas different arguments might appeal to and sway different individuals.⁴⁵

Graphical messages that accompany textual or oral communications are particularly effective in conditions of low interest or opportunity because they create additional ways for people to access information. Graphics can be processed immediately and holistically by using multiple cognitive resources, thus reducing required processing time and effort. Among the most efficient are "interactive" pictures that present a single picture that visually illustrates a concept and a key attribute.⁴⁶

Enhancing opportunity also entails adroit avoidance of problems that might unintentionally limit opportunities to process. *Distractions* can disrupt or discourage the orderly processing of information. Examples include annoying music or excessively attractive (i.e., overly arousing) spokespersons, inflammatory or insulting language, or derogatory or stereotyped imagery. Disorganized, confused, or overly complex arguments or graphic presentations can lead audiences to become frustrated and stop processing a message. Evidence suggests that optimal processing occurs when audiences can control the pace of message consumption—an argument that favors print (vs. broadcast) for all but the simplest propositions. Time-compressed presentations have been shown to be detrimental to effective processing.⁴⁷ However, presentations that move too slowly can be equally deadly because audiences become bored and cease processing.

DISCUSSION

This article has suggested that public relations communicators must endeavor to enhance the motivation and ability of inactive publics to engage in communications important to an organization. Public relations communicators also must create opportunities to communicate because inattentive publics are not likely to initiate them, unless they need to do so to solve a problem or as a result of some other self-interest.

Motivation, ability and opportunity operate independently. Thus, a message strategist needs to consider each of these factors and to select strategies that are appropriate for each of them in a given situation. When critiquing their work, message strategists must ask themselves whether a message or message strategy

provided sufficient motivation, ability, and opportunity for audiences to attend to, comprehend, and process their message.

The heuristic value of this model lies in that it provides a checklist for evaluating messages. A message creator can examine the various options represented in Figure 1 to make sure that a given message or message strategies makes optimal use of a combination of the techniques listed in each column. In the case of a message that might be of little interest to the audience, it will be especially important to infuse the message with elements that promote motivation to process. If a message is believed to be potentially difficult for an audience, message creators must maximize their use of devices to make a message easy for audiences to process. Likewise, increasing opportunities to process will be important in situations of either low motivation or low ability.

Theoretical Value of the Model

Public relations theorists need to broaden their attention beyond the groups that are actively engaged in challenging the agenda of an organization (active publics) to thoughtfully consider other key types of publics: inactive publics, merely aroused publics, and uninvolved but aware publics. Each of these types of publics represents important groups that organizations should take into account when planning public relations efforts. More needs to be known about how to communicate with publics low in motivation and/or ability.

Toward this end, the M-A-O model offers a potentially useful framework for conceptualizing and unifying otherwise seemingly disjointed message tactics that can be undertaken to communicate better with publics. Normative theorizing that suggests organizations ought to engage in two-way, symmetrical communication is useful to the extent it argues that organizations should deliberately create *opportunities* for dialogue, negotiation, and other exchanges with key publics. However, normative theory largely ignores the wide differences that can exist in levels of involvement (motivation) and knowledge (ability) among groups that constitute publics. The idea that effective communication involves enhancing the motivation and ability of the parties to communicate, as well as the creation of opportunities to communicate, moves the question into the realm of actionable strategies that organizations can pursue.

Researchers in public relations also need to devote more attention to the underlying processes that make public relations strategies work. Overall, public relations message strategists have had to rely on the conclusions of researchers working in fields such as social psychology and consumer research for their theoretical understanding of influence processes. Public relations researchers need to devote more attention to the effect of factors such as those listed in Figure 1 and engage in more basic research about influence processes that provide the foundation for public relations work. In particular, it would be valuable to determine how the general conclusions reviewed here from previous research might differ when applied in a public relations context.

Public relations is conspicuously void in the development of theories related

to communication processes. The M-A-O model is not a formula for persuasion, but rather focuses on the antecedents of information processing more generally. Thus it has broad implications that can be applied across different theoretical approaches to public relations. It could be argued that enhancing motivation, ability, and opportunity is fundamental to communications with any of the principal types of publics that might be the targets of public relations efforts. Yet, the value of the M-A-O model is particularly important in dealing with inactive publics, where motivation, ability, and opportunity are all low.

Notes

1. Kirk Hallahan, "Inactive Publics: The Forgotten Publics In Public Relations," *Public Relations Review* 26 (Winter 2000), pp. 499–515.
2. James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1984), p. 148. Dennis Wilcox, Philip Ault, and Warren K. Agee, *Public Relations Strategies & Tactics*, 5th ed., (New York, NY: Longman, 1997), p. 167.
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