



PRIME FIBS . . . JUICY MORSELS THAT ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

-Amy Showalter & Peter Kennerdell

Do you ever wonder where certain “laws” of public affairs management and strategy are initiated, and how they are accepted into the mainstream thoughts and practices of paid professionals? Do you ever question why we take advice from certain “experts?”

A recent experience reminded me of the following amendment that was proposed to a bill in the New Mexico State Legislature in 1997:

“When a psychologist or psychiatrist testifies, he shall wear a cone-shaped hat that is not less than two feet tall. The surface of the hat shall be imprinted with stars and lightening bolts. Additionally, he shall be required to put on a white beard that is not less than 18 inches in length. He shall punctuate crucial elements of his testimony by stabbing the air with a wand. When a psychologist or psychiatrist provides testimony, the bailiff shall contemporaneously dim the lights and administer two strikes to a Chinese gong.”

Senator Duncan Scott left no doubt. He unequivocally revealed his attitude towards “experts” who testified in criminal trials that defendants are insane and, therefore, are not legally responsible for their crimes. His colleagues shared Senator Scott’s views, and voted to approve the proposal! It got as far as the House of Representatives, which eventually blocked it from enactment.

Our concern regarding bad advice went up a couple degrees recently. The experience forced us to ask: To whom are we listening? Who are we using as our exemplars and role models? From whom have we decided to accept advice?

At a recent meeting conducted by an organization for public affairs professionals, the group discussed grassroots program development, from initiation to maintenance issues. Advice was being spewed forth as the gospel truth, without consideration for solid research, tested approaches, or organizational context. Also, there was no information on how the information was revealed. An online survey? Focus groups? Casual conversation? I became really panicked when I saw the participants frantically taking notes after each new advisory.

At the same meeting, several handouts were given to participants. Some of the handouts were dated from 1992! I calculated the average age of the handouts to be 1996 — over five years old.

This experience caused me to remember all of the Prime Fibs relative to government relations management that have been extolled through the years. While this article does not permit me to enumerate all of them, here are some of our favorite Prime Fibs that we have heard recently. What makes them especially panic inducing is that they are from “experts” who get paid to advise public affairs professionals.

“Employees who serve on the PAC Board will have constant access to the senior leaders of the company.”

Obviously, the person who said this has never served on a PAC Board, had to recruit PAC members or manage a PAC. Those of us who have served in one of these capacities know that nothing provides *constant* access to your senior company leaders.

This Prime Fib disturbs us because people who took this advice are surely de-motivated after the “constant

access” never materialized. Management expert Victor Vroom, through years of research, developed the Expectancy Theory. The Expectancy Theory states that when expectations do not meet reality, people become de-motivated. The ultimate outcome of de-motivated PAC members is a higher drop out rate, negative word of mouth to potential PAC members, resulting in less PAC funds.

“Assessing your organization’s web-based presence with an online advocacy audit is the cornerstone of a successful government relations strategy.”

In every heresy there is a grain of truth. It is important to check out what your opponents are saying about you and what you are communicating online through your web-based advocacy efforts. However, declaring it as the *cornerstone* of a successful government relations strategy is stretching it. The definition of cornerstone is, “a foundation, a tenet upon which something stands or is supported.”

If that were true, it would mean that a government relations department should put most financial and human resources toward this end. It should receive more time and attention than your message frames and influence strategy. We respectfully disagree.

“Only someone who has worked on Capitol Hill should speak to your grassroots volunteers, PAC Board, etc.”

We tend to think that groups who use this as their litmus test must want their members to get jobs on the Hill. Knowing Capitol Hill and knowing one’s audience are different, and expertise in each area will produce different results. I do agree that your audience needs to hear from professionals who know how the legislative process works through internal experience or work that exposes them to the legislative process. If you are conducting a meeting where a transfer of knowledge is the only goal, Capitol Hill experience may be appropriate, but remember that your members can learn the legislative process on the Internet.

The real test of the speaker’s fit for your organization is whether he or she has a track record of results in motivating an audience to act, and better yet, has the “strict credibility” of accomplishing this before they became a paid speaker.

If you want a transfer of knowledge or pure entertainment, that’s fine, but shouldn’t the goal be behavior change? One can be a life-long Hill veteran, but if he has never had to lead or motivate his own grassroots or PAC

members, you may not be getting the results you deserve.

“The future of grassroots and PAC training will be video-based training.” (OR. . . . “I have some videos I’d like to sell you”)

We heard this Prime Fib in the mid-90’s. Interestingly, research from the Bob Pike Group, a national training firm, found in research with over 25,000 adult learners that over 75% of them prefer to learn in a *participative style*. The participative style means group settings, with live human beings. Twenty — five percent prefer the reflective style, as exemplified in e-learning and videos.

I use videos in my training workshops to illustrate a point, but they represent a fraction of the entire curriculum. Videos are appropriate for a certain part of our population, albeit a minority. It’s not, however, a training panacea.

“Online recruitment is the future of corporate and association PAC fundraising.”

When computers replace personal relationships, online PAC fundraising will be the optimal method for raising funds. Activist groups and political candidates have successfully motivated people to make significant online contributions. Unfortunately, corporate and association PAC’s rarely inspire the same degree of passion. Until they do, online enrollment is best used as a follow up to a fundraising appeals or for promoting PAC fundraising events or merchandise.

Sadly, many PAC professionals view online recruitment programs as a time saver rather than as a complement to traditional and proven fundraising techniques. The result is that they are distancing themselves from their potential donors, and losing potential PAC contributions.

“Non-government affairs employees and members are unqualified to serve on a PAC candidate selection board.”

If your employees or members don’t have the capacity to learn, then yes, they are unqualified to serve on a PAC disbursement committee. The truth is, countless PACs have demonstrated that if volunteers understand the candidate-selection criteria and are given an honest opportunity to help select worthy candidates, they take their board responsibilities seriously. By working closely with the government relations professionals, they develop an understanding of the organization’s legislative and political issues. They also gain a genuine appreciation for the government relations function.

“PAC Match (matching a PAC contribution with a charitable contribution) is a magic bullet for increasing contributions to a PAC.”

When PAC administrators learn that PAC Match can significantly increase a PAC’s income, they are often fooled into thinking that it can help their ailing PACs. Unfortunately, there is a problem with this assumption. A PAC must first establish its credibility before PAC Match provides any financial gains. PAC Match will not establish a PAC’s credibility. It will merely increase the PAC’s administrative expenses.

“If you tell your PAC members who the PAC contributed to, they will drop out of the PAC.”

If you are unable to justify your PAC’s contributions, then your members should drop out of the PAC. Sure, reports may result in a number of drop outs, but studies confirm that corporate employees appreciate receiving political information from their employers.

If your organization is supporting candidates for election

or re-election, it should be doing its best to generate votes for those candidates. Lost memberships are minor relative to the credibility that the PAC gains and votes that your supported candidates may gain.

The Results

We have learned much from the grassroots volunteers, PAC members, and government relations professionals who toil every day with the challenges of grassroots lobbying and PAC development. Conversely, we have been enraged and sometimes bored by those who are extolled as “experts.” One has to refuse to get in the pool without checking for the deep end.

The problem with not evaluating advice is that we quickly apply it to our particular situation without taking into consideration our personal and organizational needs. We should always consider the value of the approach to our singular situation, because the improved results of our public affairs efforts should be the ultimate litmus test. Otherwise, you may just be basing your program strategy on Prime Fibs.

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