

Where maintenance of good public relations is concerned, it's extremely helpful to have an understanding of what public response is likely to be before taking action in situations where there's an option as to the course to pursue. It's also valuable to know how people as a whole, not just the vocal ones, feel about such actions after they have been taken. Such information can be obtained through scientifically conducted, specially tailored, in-depth opinion sampling.

In recognition of that, giant General Electric Company (GE), headquartered in Fairfield, CT, uses regular, comprehensive surveys. The activity, known as the Quarterly Index of Company Relations (QICR), is handled by a GE unit known as Public Opinion Research (POR). POR has a staff of five, of whom Dr. Herbert E. Krugman is the POR Manager, and is part of the company's "Corporate Public Relations Operation," directed by Douglas S. Moore, Vice President for Public Affairs.

POR prepares the questions to be asked and, after the answers have been obtained and broken down into a great variety of classifications by outside specialists, analyzes the results and issues reports of the findings. Continuity is considered important and many of the same individuals have been involved in the project since it was started in 1965. These include even the interviewers, supervisors, coders, and key-punchers of the principal outsider servicer -- Trendex, Inc., Westport, CT.

Trendex interviewers, located at 82 centers across the U.S.A., obtain answers every quarter to three separate questionnaires. Each is submitted to a new national sample of at least 1,000 persons. They are interviewed by telephone for an average of 35 minutes. Adults comprise two of the groups and college students, the third.

The adults are chosen at random -- following established probability procedures -- from telephone directories in 205 areas within 70 markets. Calls are made during weekdays and weekends and

during daytime and evening hours. Phones which don't answer are given a second call during a different time period. . . Equal numbers of males and females are interviewed (the interviewer asks for a person of the sex needed to maintain balance at the particular time). . . To assure thorough exploration of the questions, each interviewee is informed of the time which will be necessary so that, if busy, he or she can decline to participate.

The students interviewed are ones who live in households of adult interviewees and are at home when the calls are made. (If the 2,000 adult families don't have 1,000 such students, more adults are interviewed.) Summer surveys naturally pick up many more students who attend college away from home. This provides an opportunity to compare attitudes of live-at-homers with the away-at-college ones. (No effort has been made to reach an equal number of each sex.)

A questionnaire always starts and finishes with an open-ended question (i.e., where the respondent expresses his or her views ad lib). There are about six questions of that type and 20 "structured" (multiple choice) ones. A yes-or-no question is "almost never" used. . . The two sets of questionnaires for adults normally contain many questions which are the same; but having several different enables coverage of a wider range of subjects without lengthening the interview time. . . The questions put to the students, while covering broad social issues, also deal with their particular interests (such as careers).

The interviewing takes seven to nine days. Trendex then punches the information into data-processing cards and sends them to a computer house for processing. The latter gives POR the results, on magnetic tape, in two sections. The first, five weeks after interviewing starts, covers highlights. The second, three or four weeks after that, classifies the responses in detail along such lines as: education; income; size of household; sex; and, in some cases, region and size of city.

About a week after receipt of the first tapes, POR places in the hands of some 400 top GE executives (from Directors down through General Managers) a four-page, 8½x11-inch QICR Highlights Report. The first page carries a chart showing the long-term trends (based on answers to the same questions asked over the past fourteen years) of attitudes toward matters of general public concern. The next two provide information about GE's reputation, first as a summary and next in detail. The last page deals with some particularly timely subject. . . Six weeks after that, the same people (other than Directors) are given a highly detailed, 60-70-page, 8½x11-inch "QICR Analysis Report."

Krugman points out that most recipients of the Reports are at GE's 150 plant locations which are spread across the U.S.A. For that reason, he doesn't know all the uses to which the findings are put. In general, however, they help GE executives by creating awareness of changes in public attitudes toward issues and how these affect GE in particular and foreseeing important developments. Here are some specific ways.

Impact of advertising programs is evaluated by comparing attitudes of those persons who did and those who did not see GE's TV shows during the preceding quarter or read the magazines in which the company had advertised.

In a somewhat related area, GE marketing executives find general public attitudes (and those in different geographical areas) helpful in planning. (POR does NOT evaluate potential markets for consumer products.) For example, in estimating prospective demand for electricity, accuracy is increased by determining public attitudes toward energy conservation, family planning, and how best to cope with inflation.

In handling communications for an organization as heavily diversified and widespread as GE, it's expensive and wasteful and even self-defeating to communicate every message on a national basis. QICR can help in this regard by determining the specific geographic regions in which a particular matter is of significant interest and concern.

(more)

Exemplifying QICR's value in the legislative area was its discovery of steeply rising public opposition which would kill approval by the U.S. Congress of development of a U.S.A. supersonic transport. (GE held the contract for its engines.)

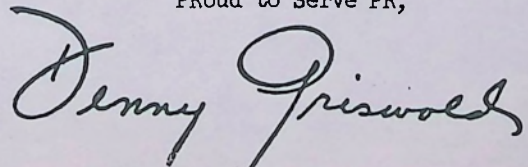
Information developed by QICR is stored on tapes in a data bank which serves two major purposes. Since there is repeated questioning about the same areas of concern, this enables plotting of long-term trends. And the data bank has proved valuable in researching subjects which had been only coincidentally touched upon when the surveys were made. Requests for information have covered an "enormous territory," says Krugman, but in more than half the cases there proved to be relevant material on file. Such inquiries, he adds, often suggest new areas of research for the next survey.

Examples of where information from the data bank has been useful -- and even unique -- have been "ten-year track records" on such subjects as: fear of neighborhood crime; attitudes toward development of electric-powered automobiles; and willingness of people to improve spending for various types of environmental improvement.

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For Your PR NEWS Idea Library, write to: Wells P. Allen, Jr., Pres. & COO, New York State Electric & Gas Corp., Box 287, Ithaca, NY 14850, for "1978 Annual Report"; its cover effectively demonstrates the voluminous and costly (\$30 million) reports required by regulatory agencies for a proposed nuclear generating station. . . Robert B. Clark, Pres., Hoffman La Roche Inc., Nutley, NJ 07110, for "Business Responsibility," brochure stating HLR's commitment to society and pointing out that reputation of its products "is often influenced by the measure of corporate concern it expresses for the community, public issues, energy and the environment and, of course, its employees."

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Editor