

Sound communication with a company's customers calls for informing them fully about policies and products. And it also requires careful attention to complaints and suggestions. These practices are carefully followed at Ford Motor Company, Dearborn, Mich., giant automotive manufacturer.

Eager to establish direct and honest dialogue with consumers, a "Ford Listens" program was set up. The public is invited to send written complaints and comments and is assured that the company is sincerely interested in listening and responding. To underline the latter thought, no form letters are used in answering such communications from consumers.

Ford's Advertising Department promotes the activity through a campaign titled "Ford Listens Better"; it calls for use of paid messages on the air and in magazines and newspapers. Two-minute spots on TV discuss such matters as imports, pollution, and durability of Ford Cars. The company first presents its point of view and then asks for the public's. Low-key and straightforward copy in the print media ads invites people to: "Send us your likes, dislikes, wants, needs, gripes, etc. Your letter will be read, considered, and answered.... Write if you've got a problem and we'll write back. We really want to help." Subjects discussed include safety features, air pollution, and no-fault automobile liability insurance. In many cases, readers are asked to fill out a form as part of a survey of consumer opinions.

To handle the correspondence, 24 consumer-oriented college students or recent graduates are enlisted to work at Ford's World Headquarters building in Dearborn. They are chosen on the basis of their performance in a writing test given by supervisory personnel of the Ford Listens Better program. Those selected are furnished with material describing the program and with sources (reference publications and research files) they will require in answering letters. They are instructed as to style of writing, study typical letters from consumers, and practice writing until their answers are "clear, concise, complete, and, most of all, responsive." When one's ability to handle letters on his own is considered good, he begins taking letters from a general pool. A Ford staffer, intimately acquainted with the information file, is constantly available for assistance at all times. Responses are edited before mailing.

Every letter is immediately answered. When a query must be forwarded to another department for information or action, necessitating delay, the inquirer is thanked for his comments and is advised who will respond and when.

More than 2,200 letters are received daily.

Of those received to date, 46% contained requests for information, 32%, product complaints (such as assembly errors), and 21%, comments, suggestions, and criticisms (of dealers, advertising, and corporate policies). Only 1% were "crank letters." Many complimented Ford for launching the listening campaign. (One said: "Thanks for providing an outlet, in the form of an invitation to criticize, for my hostilities.") And a few contained such admonishments as "Ford Motor Company Better Listen". The writers, reports John J. Morrissey, Executive Director-Advertising and Research, are: "young, old, men, women, owners of our products, owners of competitive products, people who like us, and people who don't.... Above all, they are articulate, intelligent, and sincere.... Their bricks are big and so are their bouquets."
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Suggestions which may involve novel concepts or applications are acknowledged by letters outlining the conditions under which the company will consider them. (These are "designed to insure that the rights of both the suggester and Ford are safeguarded.") Additional correspondence is then handled by appropriate Ford executives.

All letters are coded and fed into computers so as to determine what consumers are thinking. Findings are reported monthly to all levels of management under the heading, "Here's What They Are Telling Us." Such reports contain excerpts from letters, details of criticism, and suggestions.

The PR department issues frequent releases about the program's progress as well as the company's constructive actions. These report that, for example, the goal of "Ford Listens Better" is "to establish and maintain direct and honest one-for-one dialogue with consumers." Sometimes they tell about the number of letters received, their subjects, and suggestions adopted.

Customer comments have prompted constructive action. . . One example was the creation of a Ford Customer Service Division; it places service on the same level of responsibility as sales and provides a means to work out service problems with owners and dealers.

Because many people expressed bewilderment at the multitude of new car models and options, Ford prepared a 144-page booklet, "Car Buying Made Easier." In simple, non-technical language, it provides basic information to help people make sound purchase decisions. Within a year, requests for over 900,000 copies were received. The popularity of the booklet (six editions to date; a seventh planned for 1974), was announced in a widely distributed release.

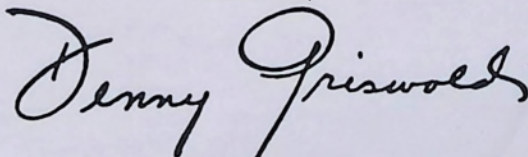
Other releases have reported colorful anecdotes.

Commenting on Ford Listens Better, Morrissey says: "Research shows that it helps to keep the company aware of the needs of consumers, information which is essential to successful marketing. We're convinced that the program will continue to play an important part in the vital area of consumer relations." Robert W. Hefty, Public Information Director, North American Automotive Operations, characterizes the program as "a pipeline to the public for the benefit of the consumer and the company alike."

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For your PR NEWS IDEA LIBRARY, write to: Charles H. Zeanah, Corp. PR Dir., Ethyl, 330 So. 4th St., Richmond, Va. 23219, for "Richmond, Va.," description and picturization of the company's headquarters designed to attract visitors. . . Dr. Carl F. Hawver, Exec. Vice Pres., National Consumer Finance Ass'n, 1000-16th St., N.W., Washington, D. C. 20036, for "Finance Facts Yearbook," a reference tool for mediagen, educators, students, economists, legislators, libraries, and others who seek "a better understanding of the American consumer and his financial behavior...."

Sincerely,



Editor