

# When theories collide

by Paul McKellips

I confess. I've grown to despise brick-and-mortar stores with their never-to-be-found 'customer service' clerks. I've become an Internet shopper. In early December I start browsing through virtual showcases looking for those special gifts for my sons. I search for the kind of gift that screams, "Dad cared enough to find something perfect just for me!" which is then gift-wrapped, labeled and shipped by a complete stranger and arrives at my doorstep via a brown sleigh with one frazzled driver and no reindeer.

The video camera is recording as the gift is unwrapped with unbridled enthusiasm until the receiving child looks inside the box and asks, "What is it?"

My 'plug-and-play' intentions are quickly replaced with thoughts of 'assembly required' and a litany of whispered expletives. Even though I'm a writer, I don't understand—or have the patience for—assembly instructions. Maybe if I were fluent in Mandarin Chinese, I could follow the instruction manual. But like many men who don't ask for directions, I don't use them either.

After a painstaking assembly process on the dining room table, I'm often left to wonder why the brand-new P-51 gas-powered Mustang crashes and explodes on my son's maiden flight. I fiddle nervously through the unused parts in my pocket and wonder, "Was it me?"

If I used the instruction manual, perhaps I wouldn't crash and burn quite so often.

Communications theory and the art of public relations have numerous 'instruction manuals' of their own, and just about all of them are at play when it comes to biomedical research, especially as it relates to lab animals.

But what if communications theories collide or—worse yet—we discard the instructions and assemble our communications on-the-fly from the proverbial dining room table?

We crash and burn.

When the animal rights movement kicked into gear in the mid-1970s, corporate CEOs and university chancellors started to embrace 'spiral of silence' communications theory. Coined by Elisabeth Noelle Neumann, the theory argues that people tend to remain silent when they believe their views are in the minority. As a result, they form a silent majority, afraid of isolation and criticism, and ultimately vote with the minority by casting the ballot of silence.

## The 'spiral of silence' culture guarantees that nary a peep can be heard in defense of lab animal research.

By keeping silent at the Thanksgiving meal or the neighborhood party, among high-net-worth donors or even at the shareholders' meeting, we essentially 'vote' in absentia with the minority because we mistakenly feel our opinions are in the minority.

Seizing on the opportunity they were given by the corporate and institutional spiral of silence, animal rights groups began to follow Paul Lazarsfeld's 'two-step flow' theory, which basically asserts that ideas flow from the mass media to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population.

So, animal rights groups trigger earned media coverage through a break-in, direct action or outlandish allegation, knowing that it won't be long until a Hollywood actor, politician or blogger picks up the story and sends it down to the less active masses of the population. The 'spiral of silence' culture guarantees that nary a peep can be heard in defense of lab animal research, and so the story goes unchallenged and is accepted by the public as truth.

I believe that successful communications on the subject of why we need lab animals to continue the quest for medical cures and

breakthroughs relies on four communications theories that must build upon each other.

It starts with constructivism. Knowledge and, to a lesser extent, public opinion are constructed, not transmitted. The first task of lab animal communicators is to understand how receivers think about the use of lab animals in biomedical research and then work to challenge their preconceived notions with the goal of converting those views. That's why I use focus groups before I use evidence, data and science. I want to know what people think before I try to change what they think they know.

Second, I subscribe to coordinated management of meaning, a theory based on social interaction. It argues that when we communicate, we build our social realities. We each have our stories of life experience, and we share them through social interaction. This process of sharing serves to coordinate our beliefs and ideas with each other so that a mutual outcome might occur. That's why I begin discussions of lab animals or animal rights with the patient experience: because it's a shared life experience.

Third, Elmo Roper's concentric-circle theory empowers each of us to let our ideas evolve from our core convictions and to communicate them out into our spheres of influence and gradually to the public at large by moving in concentric circles, away from us and toward others, from what we know to be true, in order to influence what they think must be true.

The final theory is immersion. Sure, we can stand on the side of the conversation pool and check the temperature of the water with our toes. Or we can jump in.

As long as your communications don't make too many internal waves, you needn't worry about colliding with the CEOs and chancellors who are hunkered down inside their safe and secure spirals of silence.

Start with the patient experience. Explain the truth about animal welfare and the need for lab animal models. You won't crash and burn.

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