The Challenge to Effective American Public Diplomacy

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Public Communication Hurdles

- Attention
- Comprehension
- Retention
- Action
Comprehension Problem

What America thinks is being communicated is not what the Arab public understands.
Getting over the Comprehension Hurdle

• Think of public diplomacy as a *process* as well as a *product*

• Think of public diplomacy as an *intercultural communication process*

• Think of the *cultural barriers*

• Think of *multicultural strategies*
Intercultural Communication Process

It’s not just about cultural differences – it’s how the differences interact
Why *cultural sensitivity* important

When you violate a cultural norm through cultural insensitivity you can trigger defense mechanisms in others – they may try to reassert their values more forcefully, or attack and discredit yours.
American – Communication is . . .

• Communication = Information

• **Problem:** don’t have or don’t understand information

• **Solution:** more or better information

• **Agency:** advanced technology

• **Complaint:** information overload
American – Approach

- Preferred Channel = Mass media
- Efficient
- Credible
- Familiar
American – Strategy

Focus = Message

Create idea
Produce appealing format
Disseminate efficiently
Arab – Communication is . . .

• Communication = Relationships

• **Problem**: strained or broken relations
• **Solution**: mend or sever relations
• **Agency**: mediator, negotiator
• **Complaint**: relationship overload
Arab – Approach

- Preferred Channel = Interpersonal Communication
- Effective
- Credible
- Familiar
Unshared Assumptions

- Mass media is an effective channel
- Message is culturally neutral
- Message speaks for itself

Content is important

- Mass media not a credible channel
- Message not culturally neutral
- Audience determine meaning of message

Context is important
Result of Intercultural Comm Process

• Achieved content goal – got the message out

• Neglected context – audience supply meaning and mass media not credible

• Distortion – what America thought it was communicating (message) was not what the Arab public perceived
Effective Public Diplomacy

an intercultural communication process

of overcoming cultural barriers

through a multicultural approach

(use multicultural approach to bridge cultural differences)
Multicultural Approach

- Start with your audience and work backwards to Washington

- Audience = relationship focused
- Washington = information focused
Getting the information out through relationship-building strategies

- multicultural approach = create innovative blend of different cultural styles and preferences
Types of Relationships

- Professional
- Personal
- Community

- Diplomatic
- Regional / Issue
- Personal
- Community

(Stephen Bruning & John Ledingham, Capital University, Ohio 2000)
Goals of Relationship Building

- **Initiate**
  - create new relations through outreach, open functions, get to know visits

- **Develop**
  - build or expand existing relations by new projects, networking within circle

- **Enhance**
  - strengthen understanding, commitment, satisfaction

- **Maintain**
  - protect and preserve, demonstrate commitment
Benefits of Relationship Building

• Better predictor of audience behavior (than message dissemination)

• Allows proactive approach later (closer to needs and interest of audience)

• Acts as buffer if crisis occurs (goodwill bank account)
SMART -- Relationship Building

• **Scan** – survey and assess current state of relationship
• **Map** – construct strategic plan focused on relationships goals and activities
• **Act** – field test strategic plan and assess initial effectiveness
SMART -- Relationship Building

- Rollout – implement revised strategic plan
- Track – monitor effect on public’s perceptions and behavior

(Stephen Bruning & John Ledingham, Capital University, Ohio 2000)
Relationship Building Mindset

- Focus on two-way / interaction / dialogue
- Add personal / social connection in activity
- Build trust (credible, reliable, stable)
- Find mutual interests & goals (win/win)
- Demonstrate interest & involvement
- Build commitment (continuity)
- Think reciprocity, both are “recipients”
Relationship Building Opportunities

- Speeches – refer to history, connections, people
- ‘Being’ vs ‘Doing’ Visits
- Communicate interest vs need; not all “selling”
- Pictures, gifts, symbolic tokens
- Highlight contributions, cooperation, ties
- Embassy website – spotlight relationship
- Press breakfasts, individual get-to-know lunches
- Highlight the “who” at functions, press releases
Mono-cultural vs. Multi-cultural Approach

• It’s not about how I look (image)
• But, how you look at me (perception)

• It’s not what I say (message)
• But, what you say also (dialogue)

• It’s not what I do separately (action)
• But, what you and I do together (cooperation)
The Challenge to Effective American Public Diplomacy: *Distortions of Culture*

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