

## **Cultivation Theory**

*Cultivation theory states that the more a person is exposed to a message provided by the media, the more likely that person is to believe the message is real.*

### **Introduction**

George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory is an extremely important principle in public relations for several reasons. However, it also has negative as well as positive effects. Cultivation Theory, put simply, states that the more a person is exposed to a message provided by the media, the more likely that person is to believe the message is real. Cultivation Theory is often applied to people's perceptions of reality. For example, a person who watches a lot of crime shows on television will eventually believe that there is a lot of violent crime in the city in which he lives. This skewed world is called a "mediated reality" (Wilcox et al, 2003, p.214). The theory also states that viewers who watch more television will be more influenced than those who watch less and that "the cumulative effect of television is to create a synthetic world that heavy viewers come to see as reality" (Reber and Chang, 2001).

### **Negative Effects of Cultivation Theory**

When it comes to public relations, the Cultivation Theory can have a negative effect on a business's image. If the public is bombarded with negative materials about a company, then it is very possible that the public will no longer associate the company with its previous reputation or achievements or even its products. The public instead will focus

on the negative materials attached to the company, and if they do still attach products to a company's image, it is entirely possible that the public will then attach that negative stigma to the products.

Take, for example, Enron. Before the scandals erupted, employees were happy, stockholders were content, and the public knew very little about the company. However, once the media began airing daily news stories about the cover-ups, the public began to attach the negative stigma of scandal and corruption to the company. Americans could not tell what the company achieved or what its reputation was among other companies before it went under. However, those same Americans could tell you that Enron executives lied to their employees and hid facts from the public and the government. They could tell that the company was brought down by a select few employees who decided to stand up for the truth.

This phenomenon is a perfect example of the mediated reality as described by the Cultivation Theory. A public was bombarded with the same negative images repeatedly for months, and now that public believes that Enron is, and always has been corrupt. To that public, there was no Enron before it became a fraud.

This same principle is illustrated by the fact that news coverage of violent crimes is much more prevalent than coverage of other non-violent crimes despite the fact that violent crimes account for a much smaller percentage of crime than do non-violent crimes (Reber and Chang, 2003). Therefore, a person who watches a lot of news will believe that murder is a major crisis in his or her city when, in reality, a crime like shoplifting might be much

more prevalent. This leads to a poor image of the city when a city may in actuality may have a very low crime rate.

### **Positive Applications of Cultivation Theory**

Cultivation Theory also can be applied in a positive manner. By using the effects of a mediated reality to a company's advantage, the public relations team may be able to shift public focus to the company's goals, reputation and product.

To illustrate, Rosie O'Donnell was known for a very long time as the "Queen of Nice." By concentrating media relations on her considerable donations to charity, her quest to encourage women to have regular mammograms and her fight to help overweight women lose pounds safely, the average person's image of O'Donnell was extremely good. It is for this reason that the editors of her magazine have had such a problem painting her as a controlling, inexperienced managerial nightmare. The public's mediated reality of O'Donnell would never allow her to be anything but her candid, fun-loving, sweet self. While the battle is O'Donnell's word against the magazine executives' word, O'Donnell most definitely has the edge with the public because of her extremely positive public image.

If a company is admired by the public, then that public is generally much more willing to stand by it should a crisis or scandal occur. This is illustrated by Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia. The company had very strong ground on which to stand before its chief executive officer found herself the subject of a federal investigation. Those who were loyal to the company before the scandal broke are still as loyal, if not more so,

because of its reputation prior to the crisis (Gregory and Kadlec, 2002). For this reason, it is extremely important for a company to have a public relations team capable of creating an image that begets public admiration and support. For that image is often the only thing that can save a company when things do go wrong.

## **Conclusion**

Cultivation theory and the mediated realities suggested by it are a double-edged sword for public relations practitioners. A reality skewed in favor of a company can be extremely helpful, but a reality skewed against a company can be the straw that breaks the camel's back, so to speak. If the public is against an entity, it surely will not last long in this country in which companies rely solely on the public's consumption of a product. If a company is to survive negative media attacks, it must have established a solid reputation before and handle media relations well during a crisis. To maintain a good image companies need to use the expertise of public relations professionals.

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