

Another Brand of Soap Powder

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Stirred by a sense of public responsibility, or, moved by the fear of a drop in public support: these are but two of the possible explanations for the present desire of scientific communities to communicate with the public. Whatever the real motives, it can be certain that they will be regarded as essentially self-centred. However much the communicator may believe he is doing his audience a service, the audience is bound to suspect that the essential objective of the communicator is one of self-interest.

There is nothing dishonorable in this; it is the normal relation between client and supplier in whatever domain they operate. The man who has something to sell needs to bring it to the attention of the potential customer even though the product that is sold may well be of great benefit and even indispensable to the customer's wellbeing. The onus is upon the supplier to make publicity for his product and to sell it in competition with alternative suppliers or alternative products. The best soap powder has to be vigorously sold and the public is well aware that it is being sold primarily for the manufacturer's profit rather than the consumer's.

Physics is another brand of soap powder. As physicists, we believe that our efforts contribute to the wellbeing of humanity. It matters little whether this be in terms of new machines or new techniques, new ideas or new philosophies. If physics is to be appreciated, then physicists must sell it and must expect a certain scepticism on the part of the customer and competition from other fields of endeavour.

There are, however, many different types of salesmanship, and it is a matter for debate whether the technique should be to make the customer better informed or something else. For many years, science has been extremely successful with a policy of keeping the customer at a distance, but impressing him at regular intervals with the scientist's individual superiority and his underlying power to provide for the future in a number of ill-defined ways.

This policy may not have completely outworn its usefulness, and indeed there are still many scientists who believe it is the proper policy to adopt today. This does not mean that they are against communication, it simply means that they are against being communicative. That is to say, the public is not to be informed on matters that interest it at a level where it can comprehend. Rather it is to be lectured on topics of the scientist's choosing in jargon of the scientist's making, in order primarily to impress the public with the scientist's personal brilliance, whilst obscuring either the means or the end of the activities upon which he is engaged.

The industrial scientist has, of course, a somewhat restricted opportunity for adopting this policy. His public tends to be a management that is difficult to impress, and there are yard-sticks of pay-off and economic usefulness that have to be satisfied. Even so, there are many industrial companies that are supporting research programmes for reasons that are somewhat obscure and many programmes continue long after their usefulness has become questionable.

If the applied scientist can even partially succeed with a policy of 'blinding with science' how much more can the academic world and the pure research man, whose public is diffuse, whose control is less expert, whose objectives cannot be measured in money and whose output is difficult to quantify.

This is a position of apparent strength and, before retreating from it, it is well to study the consequences. The most obvious danger is that the public, once it understands a given programme of work, will then decide that it dislikes it, either because it seems irrelevant or insignificant or, even more seriously, because it believes it to be actively against the interest of the people who are providing the means. This may not be a question of presentation, or sales technique; this may simply be that the product is undesirable. If the soap powder damages the clothes, then even the most brilliant sales campaign can do no more than delay

the moment when it leaves the market!

There are risks in instituting a high level of communication with the public which it would be wise to recognize; but there now seems no alternative. The public is becoming too sophisticated to accept the position of humble ignoramus whose duty is to pay without question. The public is also beginning to want to impose its own criteria of evaluation. It is not content with simply being told what it ought to want, or what it ought to support; it is beginning to have its own set of values, which are not necessarily those of the economist, nor those generated by the self-indulgent introspection of some members of the scientific community. Going into the market place to talk to the people inevitably means that people will talk back. Whether they buy the product that is being sold depends upon whether the product is worth buying, and on how it is sold.

It is obviously unwise to let the public understand that the essential object of any particular investment is to provide a comfortable existence for the recipient, be this defined as tranquil or exciting, reflective or active — even intellectually. The public will not buy a soap powder simply because it gives the manufacturer pleasure to produce it!

Salemanship has become these days a highly specialized operation. There are, however, certain elementary rules which are self-evident even to the non-expert. In the first place, the customer must be considered; it is his taste that has to be satisfied. There are also higher levels of technique involving the education of the customer so that he can appreciate more refined products, and this is clearly a most important aspect of the promotion of a cultural activity such as physics. Education of the public must be treated very seriously, but it is still secondary to the primary requirement of giving the public the information that it wishes to receive, on the subjects that interest it, and in a form that it finds palatable. Often scientists are so wrapped up in their product, that the customer is not considered. The scientist presumes to define what the customer wants, rather than listening to what the customer has to say for himself. The soap-powder manufacturer who did this would soon find himself out of business!

Normally the public is not interested in the detail. It is neither competent to assess it, nor prepared to take

the trouble to equip itself with the basic information needed to do so. Only the principles are important. The public attitude can be expressed as 'Spare me the details, tell me what it costs and what's in it for me'. And the new factor in the relationship between public and science is the rider, 'and if you don't or can't, then don't expect me to support you for much longer'.

This is the language of the market place and one can imagine many scientists being saddened at the crudity of it all. However, it would be wise not to under-estimate the public. When the man in the street asks the question 'what's in it for me?', it must not be assumed that his standards are only material or that as consumer his culture is inferior to that of the producer. The broad judg-

ments of an informed public are no less valid than those of the physicist just because its familiarity with jargon in a particular field is limited. If the public fails to appreciate a particular product, then one must study, on the one hand, whether it has been presented in an intelligible form and, on the other, whether it indeed merits the public's support.

A New Deal for Associate Members

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At its session in Geneva on 16 January 1973, the Executive Committee agreed to improve the services which EPS will render from now on to its Associate Members (*Europhysics News* 8 (March 1970)). The revised scheme was prepared by the Advisory Committee on Applied Physics and Physics in Industry (ACAPPI), based on a European-wide opinion survey (*Europhysics News* 2 (March 1972)) and taking fully into account a subsequent business meeting with the Associate Members on the occasion of the Second General Conference in Wiesbaden on 4 October 1972.

The services now proposed are listed below with brief explanatory comments in each instance.

- 1 *Associate Members will receive information about conferences.* This comprises information about relevant post-doctoral courses, refresher courses and summer schools. It will include programmes and proceedings of EPS organised conferences and courses.
- 2 *Associate Members will receive all publications of the Society.* These comprise periodical publications (*Europhysics News*) and those issued as occasion demands, such as the annual Information Booklet.
- 3 *EPS general and topical conferences will include sessions of particular interest to Associate Members and their staff.* ACAPPI will monitor this aspect and will cooperate with programme committees in order to ensure adequate coverage of relevant topics. It has already been found that programme organisers are sympathetic to the integration of such sessions into

regular conferences, thus helping to promote the concept of EPS as an organisation for pure and applied physicists. The alternative of holding conferences restricted to Associate Member interests is, in general, considered undesirable as it would tend to sacrifice the considerable benefits to be gained from bringing together the pure and applied practitioners of physics in a common forum.

- 4 *Associate Members will be entitled to fee-reduction with regard to:*

- Advertisements in *Europhysics News*
- Rent of space at EPS organized physics exhibitions

These fee-reductions will be of the order of 25 %.

- 5 *Associate Members will receive a list of institutions and companies related to physics*

This list is being prepared by ACAPPI. It is available for a number of countries, while other country-lists are in preparation. Contributors to this list have done so on the understanding that it will not be used for other than reasonable professional purposes. In particular, Associate Members are not entitled to use it for routine (non-selective) mailing of commercial, promotional circulars.

- 6 *Once a year Europhysics News will print a complete list of all Associate Members.*

The wide circulation of *Europhysics News* (38,000 copies) guarantees a significant advertising effect.

- 7 *Business meetings with Associate Members will be organised in order*

to discuss mutual relations and to resolve specific problems.

Such meetings will be organised from time to time depending on demand, preferably on the occasion of general EPS conferences when staff representing Associate Members are likely to be present for the scientific sessions.

- 8 **Most importantly:** *Associate Members will benefit by participation in the various scientific and technological activities of EPS.*

These benefits may be direct or indirect; the participation may be direct through the senior nominated representatives of Associate Members themselves or indirectly via individual physicists from their organisations. This identification with the physics community should continue to constitute the main stimulus for institutions and companies to acquire an Associate Membership.

- 9 *Services will be up-dated as required*

The Executive Committee, advised by ACAPPI, will constantly keep under review the services which EPS provides to Associate Members and, within the limits of finance, practicability and appropriateness, will not hesitate to amend and to augment these services as the needs become more clearly recognized.

Recently, EPS has initiated a recruiting campaign in various European countries in order to acquire new Associate Members. It is expected that the extension of the services for Associate Members described above will have a positive impact on the campaign. Individual physicists working in institutions or companies eligible for Associate Membership are encouraged to promote the idea of Associate Membership at their organisations. Upon request, additional information and application forms are available from the EPS Main Secretariat.