

Sound Bite Legends Are Bad for You: Countering Clever Quips With Staying Power

BY JAMES DONNELLY

"The Three Mile Island accident was a disaster that awakened us to the dangers of nuclear power."

"Compact fluorescent lightbulbs are good for the environment."

"DDT was a pesticide that was very harmful to humans."

Make any of these statements to an audience and most likely the majority will nod in agreement. A pity, since not one of these statements is completely true. They're sound bites that have become legend.

The incident at Three Mile Island resulted in no injuries, deaths or illnesses. Mistakes were made, but ultimately, secondary safety systems worked with minutes to spare. Disaster was averted, but the producers of Hollywood's "The China Syndrome" (released a few weeks before) and activists rallied around the event to make their "no nukes" message stick. Today, most people still speak of the phantom disaster. It's a sound bite legend.

Compact fluorescent lightbulbs burn longer and require less power than regular lightbulbs, but calling them environmentally friendly is a stretch since they contain poisonous mercury. You can't simply throw away these squiggly bulbs when they

expire; you must take them to special collection centers. If they break in your home, you are expected to ventilate the area, wear protective goggles and gloves, put the waste in an airtight container and (in some states) check with authorities to properly dispose of the hazardous material. Compact fluorescent lightbulbs being good for the environment? Sound bite legend.

And then there is DDT, the chemical villain of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" that led to a U.S. DDT ban in 1972.

Decades of scientific review have proved Carson's conclusions to be exaggerated. Today's scientific consensus is that proper DDT use is safe for humans and the environment, and could save the lives of nearly 100,000 people a year who suffer from malaria in Africa.

In fact, some African health officials are pleading for access to cheap DDT. Why is it so difficult for a chemical manufacturer to make DDT available? In part, because the public thinks DDT is dangerous. That sound bite legend is hurting many innocent people.

Some activists and special interest groups understand the power of the sound bite (remember "Frankenfoods?") and know once these clever quips become legend, they're difficult for communicators to fight. Smart businesses and industries must learn to anticipate and avoid be-

coming victims of sound bite legends.

To that end, here are a few tips:

- **Define your audience.** In point/counterpoint situations, industries sometimes spend too much effort trying to change the opinions of critics — many of whom are recalcitrant. It is wiser to focus positive communications on audiences with the most at stake.

- **Go heart-to-heart.** Negative sound bites frequently appeal to the public's heart. Too often, industries respond with science and facts that are aimed at the mind. It is important to inject your own positive emotion through powerful sound bites. After that, you can back up your position with facts and data.

- **Shape your message now.** First-mover advantage is powerful in a war of perception. For example, nanotechnology and alternative-fuel industry representatives should begin promoting their benefits today — with sound bites that appeal to our emotions and reason — before the critics take the floor. ■



James Donnelly is senior vice president, crisis management at Ketchum with broad experience in issues/crisis management, crisis training, communications training, corporate public relations, and global corporate communications.